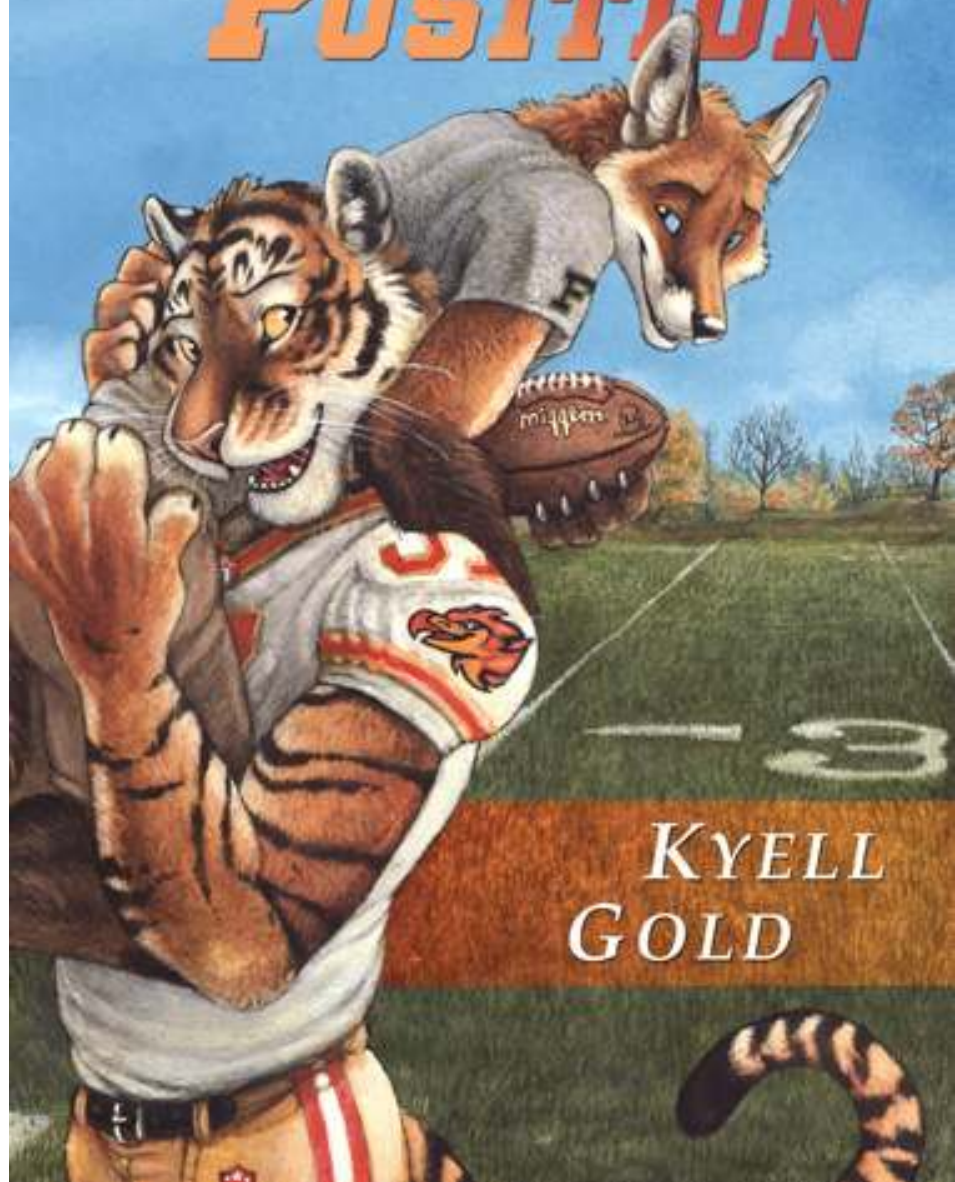
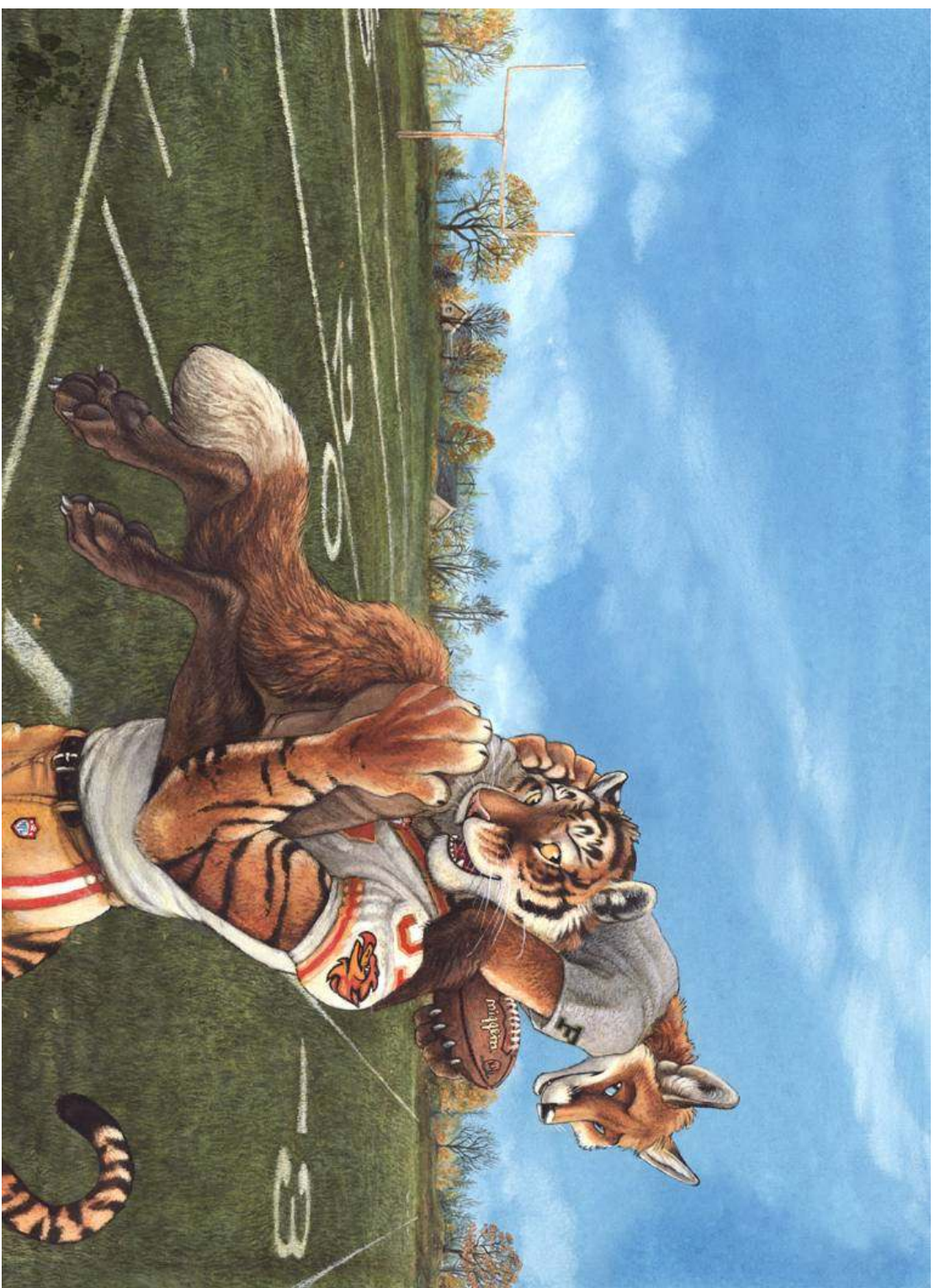


OUT OF POSITION



KYELL
GOLD



Out of Position

by Kyell Gold

This is a work of fiction.

All characters and events portrayed within are fictitious.

OUT OF POSITION

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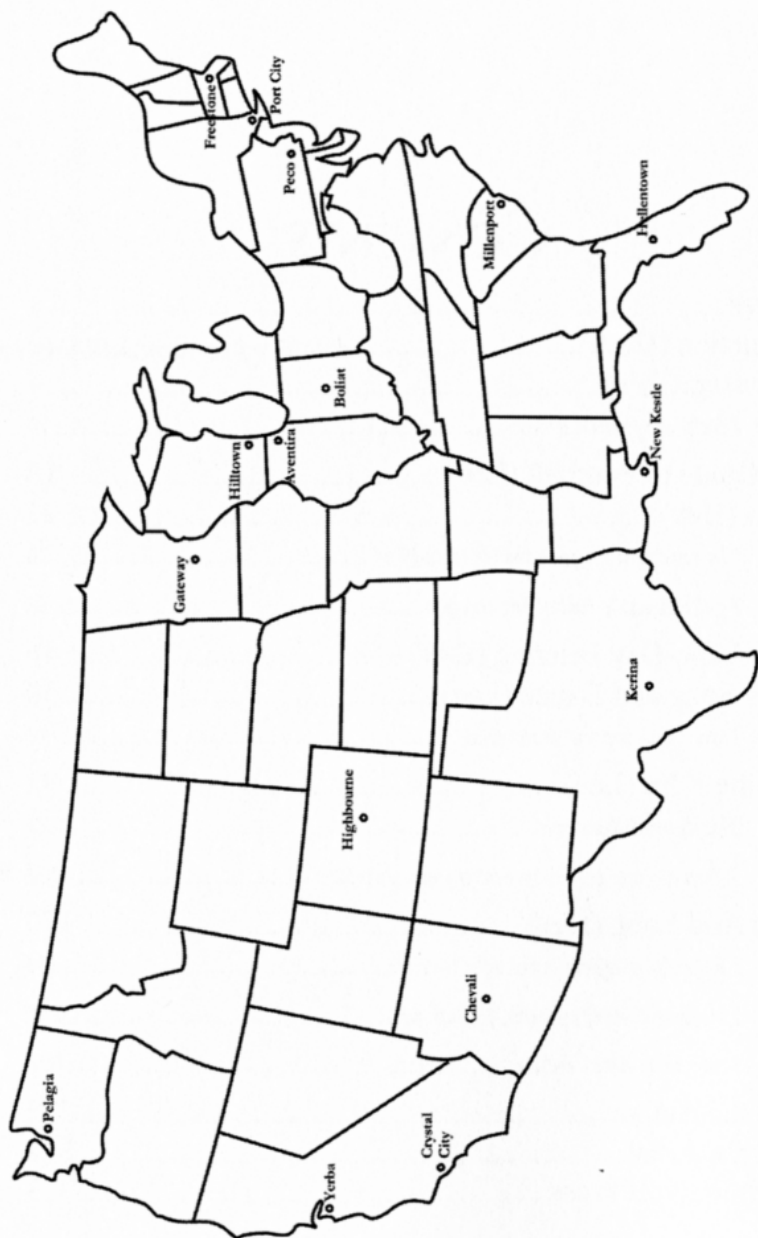
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*For Jim and Justin, and Kevin and Mark,
who love both football and animal-people,
and whose teams have all won Super Bowls
since I met them.*

My turn?

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I'm not saying that the Forester Universe cities are in the United States. But if they were, this is where they would be.

Foreword

This is not a story about football. It's a romance that takes place in a world I created, loosely based on our contemporary world, in which football plays a large part. I point this out for two reasons: first, to encourage you to keep reading if you're not a fan of the game, as I suspect the majority of gay furry romance fans are not; second, to partially excuse the inaccuracies in my representation of the game of football and the behind-the-scenes life of the athletes.

This is a story about relationships. It's about different perceptions of what responsibilities you have in a relationship, and about the sacrifices you make and the rewards you gain. It's about learning that the person you are in a relationship may be different from the person you were before the relationship, about not only accepting that but embracing it.

But yes, there is a fair amount of football in these pages. I enjoy watching the game, I enjoy the artificial fantasy world that the fans build up around it and that the athletes inhabit within it. If you like my depiction of it and would like to read more, I recommend Stefan Fatsis's *A Few Seconds of Panic*, an honest and in-depth record of training camp with an NFL team by a journalist who is also training with the players. Football is a physical game on the surface, but what Fatsis finds is that it is much more a mental game. There are hundreds of young men who can throw a football, but only perhaps a couple dozen who can do so and make effective decisions under pressure. One mental slip at the wrong time can cost you a score, a game, a new contract, a career.

Sort of like, you know, being in a relationship.

Whether or not you enjoy football, or enjoy my accounts of it in these pages, I hope you enjoy the adventures of a fox and tiger trying to figure out their place in the world. As seems to happen often to me, I did not anticipate that this would become a novel, but the characters would not go away until I'd written more, and more, and more, and so you now hold the result in your hands. Thank you for giving them a chance to tell you their story.

-Ky, January 2009

Introduction (Dev)

Someone asked me recently how this all got started. "Well," I said, "it started with a girl." He laughed. I changed the subject. But it got me thinking back to that night where everything changed. Jesus, I was young then. It wasn't so long ago, but I was young. Know what I mean?

I was a junior at Forester University. When I think about it now, I see myself walking through the early morning fog that sometimes rolls in off the lake. My life was like that—walking along the paths I knew, not looking too far ahead, not worrying about what I couldn't see. But me and Randy and Mike, we thought we knew it all. Hotshot athletes on a small campus, strutting around like we owned the place. We thought we knew about school. We thought we knew about life. We thought we knew about love.

Me, I thought love was climbing into bed, a pounding release, and falling asleep. Love was a pleasant scent, a softer shade of fur, a willing smile. Love was a sexy girl, a girl who wouldn't wake me up in the morning, a girl who would wait until I called her. Mike wanted a cute ass; Randy looked for a big chest; but I loved the muzzle and ears. A girl with a nice face, whose eyes lit up when she saw me, whose voice made me tingle. At least, that was my dream. I never thought I'd actually meet her. Not 'til that night.

In Between (Dev)

April 2006

I spot her just after midnight.

I'm hanging out with the guys down at the Fang, drinking, laughing, joking, eyeing the cuties. Everyone knows the team goes there to drink every Friday night, so the ladies set themselves up down at the end of the bar. We look, we pick, we take what we want. Forester U. isn't a big football school, but there are always a few girls ready and willing for any jock that comes along.

I don't know how long she's been at the bar, but she's not giggling with the tigress who's been trying to catch my eye for an hour, and she didn't come back from the ladies' room with the sweet-looking bitch who just left with my bud Randy. She's in between the girls and boys, sitting in her own little world, and the thing of it is, the thing that gets me about her, is that she doesn't seem to mind. She inhabits her world, fills it, and doesn't need the rest of us.

The squirrel beside her keeps shooting looks from under her painted eyelids at both groups, jealous of the pretty girls, desperate for a date. But the little vixen is different. She ignores everyone as she sips something colorless from a tall, thin glass, tipping it expertly into her narrow russet muzzle. Chocolate ears swallow the dim light, but occasionally I can see the white insides as they flick back and forth. I know she's listening to both us and the girls, and now that I'm watching more closely, I can see the small curve of her smile.

"Hey. Hey! Dev?"

I snap back to Mike, the cougar who plays opposite me in the secondary. "Huh?"

"I said, are you gonna go with that one or not?" He jerks a thumb towards the tigress, with all the subtlety of a fawn-colored brick.

I look again at the vixen. She's wearing a plain white blouse, offset with a gold bracelet on one arm. Maroon skirt. Long, flowing, russet tail. "No."

"All right, I'm gonna go for it." He grabs my extended paw and shook it. "Seeya tomorrow."

"Yeah." I'm left with Jason and Eck, a wolf and coyote who back up

our positions and the wideouts. They're looking at the fox, too, and then at me.

I was never much for foxes, to be honest. Little things, and they're always trying to outsmart you. Most of them think they're so fucking clever if they get you to say something stupid. Yeah, they're pretty, and they know it, but they're more trouble than they're worth.

The tigress takes another look at me, but my disinterest must be obvious, because she takes off with Mike.

Eck clears his throat. "Hey, uh, I was thinking about going for that fox."

"That's nice," I say, getting up. "You keep thinking about that."

Their mutters die down behind me as I walk up to the bar. The squirrel perks up for one hopeful moment, until I park myself on the other side of the vixen, then she slumps down again. I could give a shit.

Up close, the vixen is still striking, not one hair out of place. She pretends not to notice me at first, but I've timed it pretty well; she's just finishing her drink. "Buy you another?" I rumble.

She turns to me now, and her eyes are bright and blue. Contacts, I think, but god, they're gorgeous. So is the curve of her smile. "Actually," she says, in a low, husky voice that reminds me of Lauren Bacollie, "I'm about finished here. I was just going to head home."

"Oh." I can't tell whether this is a brush-off or not. Any other girl, I'd come right back with, "How about I join you?" but for some reason I'm hesitating here.

She looks straight ahead, so I can only see one eye. "This is the part where you offer to walk me home."

That voice is turning me on something fierce. "So, can I walk you home?"

She shrugs. "I know my own way, and I'm not drunk."

Damn foxes. Goddamn them. I'm about to walk away in disgust when I see that there's a sparkle in her eyes, a challenge, and maybe, just maybe, this time it'll be worth the trouble. "Yeah," I say, "But it's late, and dark. All kinds of unsavory people hanging around. I wouldn't want you to get assaulted."

"You don't think I can take care of myself?" Her chocolate-brown paw plays with the matchbook on the counter, nimbly threading it between her fingers. I imagine those fingers engaged in other activities and feel myself

getting hard.

"I'm sure you can," I say, "but wouldn't it be more pleasant to let me take care of you?" I work in a subtle double meaning there.

She hesitates. I decide to play a little of her own game with her, since she's obviously interested by now. "But, if you'd rather fly solo tonight." I pretend to get up.

She lets me get to my feet, even lets me get partway to the door. I hear her behind me as I'm passing the big jukebox at the front that's only there for show. "Well," she says, "if you're going to be leaving anyway."

I turn and see her leaning on the jukebox, small red purse over one arm, that satisfied grin on her muzzle. I offer my left arm, and she takes it, touching me for the first time.

Her arm is light but strong, and it feels good in mine. She barely comes up to my chest, but as we walk out of the place, I have the odd feeling that I am just an orange-and-black striped accessory, like the purse she has shifted to her other arm.

She lives in a run-down row house off campus, without a number or a mailbox, the kind where there are six rooms and twelve students and two bathrooms. She unlocks the door and flicks her tail, waiting for me to make the next move.

"Well... you're home." I look at the paint flaking off the door frame.

She gives me one of those smiles. "Are you going to ask me for a thank you for the escort?"

If I do, she'll drag me into one of those games again. So I don't ask.

Her muzzle is soft and sweet, and she doesn't resist my tongue. I reach down to hold her shoulders, and she wraps her arms around my waist. I respond to the soft brush of her tail against my legs by wrapping mine around hers, keeping her in my embrace.

"So you were only drinking water," I say when we part, panting.

She just smiles again and slides one of those delicate, able paws down my stomach, and doesn't stop when she reaches the throbbing hard-on below it. "I think you'd better come inside."

I can't say anything. I just follow her.

She leads me up two flights of stairs, that bushy tail bobbing enticingly in front of me. I want to take the stairs two at a time, three at a time, but she's walking slowly, her paws padding up the stairs. And it's here, in the close, empty space of the hallway, that I first notice something

odd about her scent. She's tried to make it masculine, adding some kind of musk to her natural feminine musk and resulting in something in between.

That doesn't bother me. I've always liked the girls who can throw a ball and read a book, and a lot of them use touches of masculine scent to distinguish them from the bubbleheads who are mostly good for fucking and looking pretty. I already know she isn't one of those types.

Her apartment is clean and tidy, a big studio with a partly separate kitchen. I barely have time to register the posters of the swimsuit-clad male fox and the Beatles before she shuts the door and sets her purse on the small stand next to it.

"Now," she says, "I believe I was saying 'thank you.'"

We kiss again, a deep kiss, an amazing kiss. Her tongue winds around mine, her stomach rubs up and down against my hard-on until I whimper against her. I can't help myself.

She breaks the kiss and smiles at me, almost purring. "Poor kitty," she says. "Let me give you a paw."

Some noise escapes my throat, but I'm not sure what. She's got my pants open and down, and my boxers follow soon after. I can feel the stickiness on the inside as she takes them down. I'm leaking like a dorm radiator.

She applies both paws to it, trailing soft fingerpads down my whole length, claws teasing through the fur that covers my balls, tickling behind my sac and then around my thighs. She seems to have more than ten fingers. I can't separate out the sensations. When I force out another moan, she takes hold of my cock and tugs. "Let's go to bed," she says in that husky voice, and at that moment she could tell me to jump out the window and I'd be halfway to the ground before I realized anything was wrong.

Her bed is a couch that unfolds to a sleeper. She sits me on the edge and kneels between my legs, stroking me with both paws, but not firmly enough to move me along, just enough to arouse and tease. My tail thrashes against the sofa in search of something to wrap around. My paws grab her shoulders. And I see that slender muzzle move forward, the small pink tongue meeting my huge pink shaft, and the thrill is electric as she laps up the drips from my tip. Lots of girls don't like that; they'll jerk you off or let you screw 'em, but they don't want to do any licking, or oh god she takes me all the way into her mouth and I'm shuddering on the bed, it's so good.

She licks around with that soft tongue, sliding up and down and adding some suction, and my legs start to stamp the floor. I can't take much more of this, but I want to be inside her, want her against me. But I can't make her stop.

Finally, with an effort, I push her shoulders away. Her eyes meet mine, and I feel like she knows what I'm going to do even before I reach down and lift her onto the bed, straddling me. I scoot back so she can get her knees down around me and try to press her down onto my cock, but she resists for the first time.

I can't take my eyes from hers. There's a light in them and a smile on her muzzle. She must still have panties on. I slide a paw under the skirt and take my time, tracing claws up her thighs and legs, and then the outside of her hips.

She's not wearing panties.

I bring my paws in to her sex, heart beating, dick as anxious as the rest of me. And my fingers, expecting a slit, touch a furry pouch.

I stare at her. She's grinning now, one of those fox grins. I move my paw up and find a sheath and a very hard cock.

"Christ!" I swear and try to scoot back on the bed, but she—he—follows me and leans both paws on my shoulders.

"Come on, gorgeous," he says, his nose an inch from mine. "We're having such a nice time. I'll still let you fuck me."

His eyes hold me. I'm lying in bed with my paw on some other guy's cock, frozen. And then he leans down and kisses me, and it's every bit as good as before, and my mind is screaming, *Get the fuck out of there!* but my dick is saying *Get the fuck in there!*

There's no contest, really. Not at this stage, not when his tongue is melting my mouth and short-circuiting my brain. And when he pulls back and kisses my nose and says, "Nobody ever has to know," I just nod mutely.

He grabs a tube of something and smears it behind him, under his tail. I can smell it faintly, something arousing. I'm still holding his cock and he's wriggling in my paw. Then he takes mine in his paw, his delicate, strong paws, and seats me under his tail, and I slide into him, and fireworks go off in front of my eyes.

I'm barely aware of thrusting back and forth into him. His lithe body squirms back and forth over mine, humping into my paw as he leans

forward to kiss me again. I bring my legs up so I can get all the way into him, and for the first time he makes a noise of passion too, a squeaky moan into my mouth, his paws wrapping around me as we buck together in passion. All I can think about is pumping my hips into that tight, warm, slick space, and holding the fox as I yowl in climax, breaking free of our kiss as I spurt long and hard into him, my whole body tight and shuddering, an orgasm like I can't remember having ever.

I think I pass out for a minute. I am sprawled on the bed, still locked tight inside him, and my paw is still wrapped around his shaft, wet and sticky. Neither of us is moving. I open my eyes and see bright blue looking back. "You all right, stud?" He's got that amused smile on him.

"Rrrrrryeah." I swallow, try to push away the connection between what my paw is holding and the beautiful muzzle in front of me as he leans forward to kiss me again, tenderly. The passion is still there, the awareness of our unbroken intimate contact, but it's restrained, exhausted.

"So you just made love to another guy," the fox says to me. "Sounded like you liked it, too."

I'm too mellow right now to be provoked. "Whatever," I murmur.

"You done this before?"

I shake my head, and that seems to satisfy him. He kisses my nose. "Well, you were damn good. I'm gonna go clean up for a few minutes. If you're not here when I get back... that's okay. Just want you to remember this."

Remember?! I tense again and can't repress a moan as he slides off me, his rear squeezing my sensitive cock exquisitely and finally releasing me. My tail sweeps the bed contentedly.

He's gone for a while, during which I trace the patterns of the water damage on his ceiling and drift off into a pleasant haze. I consider leaving, but the post-orgasmic bliss is too nice to ruin it with activity.

When he comes back, he's wearing boxers and nothing else. I peer at him curiously. How could I have mistaken him for female? He's walking differently, acting differently now that the secret is out. Tail still arched, but it's not swinging as much; his hips don't sway. It's almost like he's a different fox, like I was just fucking his sister. But his eyes are the same bright blue, and his smile is the same when he sees me on the bed, and this time it's a genuine sweet smile, or else maybe my addled brain isn't capable of seeing smugness. "Want to get that shirt off?" he says softly, and I nod.

He helps me with that, wipes off my stomach and cock with a soft cloth, and put my boxers back on, and then says, "I don't have anywhere else to sleep."

I wave a paw, not caring. He slides into the bed and spoons back against me, that fluffy tail between us, my sheath pressed up against his rump. I let my arm flop across him because there doesn't seem to be anywhere better for it to be. And then I'm asleep.

Five in the morning. I wake up from a dream that I just fucked another guy and find him next to me, his tail tickling my arm. Cold panic grabs me. I get out of bed without waking him up, find my clothes folded neatly next to the bed, and take off. I dress in the hallway and go down the stairs as lightly as I can.

Nobody else has to know, he said. My thoughts are in a whirl as I walk down three streets without seeing them, finally finding a landmark in the dim pre-dawn light and heading for my dorm.

Damn right nobody else has to know. If he tries coming around the team, blackmailing me... he better not mess with me. Or what if he comes around wanting more? Shit! I clutch my head in my paws. I'll deal with that when it happens. I'll tell him he's got the wrong tiger. I'll pretend not to recognize him. I'll help my teammates beat the crap out of him. Well, no. A couple guys got kicked off the team last year for beating up some queer. Okay, so we'd make sure not to get caught, that's all.

What the hell did he think he was doing, anyway? Didn't he know I'd be furious? What if I'd taken a swing at him? I could've ripped his balls off right there. I could've broken his jaw. Little fucking fox, trying to put one over on the big stupid tiger. Well, just let him try again. Let him fucking try.

I stalk into the dorm, tail a-twitch, paws balled into fists. Five-twenty a.m. The 'roo at the desk recognizes me, doesn't ask for ID. Good thing. I'd probably explode at him. I get back to the room and thank god Randy's still asleep. The thick scent of his come in the room tells me he got a nice handjob, because I can smell the bitch, too. I throw myself down on my bed and try not to let the scent remind me of the fox.

To avoid Randy's inevitable question about the fox, I pretend to be asleep when he gets up and gets dressed. But we have practice that day, and no matter how much I try to stay to the other side of the field, he



catches up to me finally.

"Hey, how was that vixen?" he says, as we take a breather in between plays. "Hope you got better than what I got. She was all okay to jerk me off, but I couldn't get her to open up. Frigid bitch."

I jerk, my body coursing with a brief memory of last night's pleasure again. Aftershock: third one since leaving the fox's place this morning. New sensation for me. "Nah, she was just a tease. How did you know?"

"Eck." He jerks his muzzle to the coyote, who's watching us with the combination of hunger and envy that characterizes a good backup. He's only a frosh; he'll be starting when I graduate for sure. Jason seems to like being on the bench. Probably he'll stay there.

"Yeah, she was just... I walked her to her place... got a kiss..." I trail off. And another kiss, and another... "Uh, that was it."

Randy laughs. "Denied!" he says, and thank god coach grabs us to run a play because I wouldn't be able to laugh with him.

As it is, I get pancaked twice in practice. Once when I get hit with another aftershock, and once when I look up at the sky and see the bright blue of a passionate stare. The second time, coach tells me to hit the pine and taps Eck, not Jason, to take my place.

I'm paranoid in the shower that I'll get a hard-on looking at the other guys, but I don't. Same as it ever was. None of them turn me on one bit. I flutter back to anger at the fox. Somehow he tricked me into getting aroused by him, when I'm clearly not gay.

To prove it, I call up the memory of a sweet cheerleader I screwed last week and jerk off in the shower that night in the dorm, panting and leaning against the wall. I clean up my spunk, kicking it down the drain, and feel satisfied that I didn't think about the fox once. That's about the last moment of satisfaction I get for a while.

The following week is an absolute nightmare. I wake up in bed hard Monday morning and I think I smell him in the room, but it's only the residue of a dream I don't remember. That I was dreaming about him and waking up hard worries me a bit, but I can't stop thinking about him. I try to get angry again, but I can't see the smugness any more. I just see that sweet smile, feel that tightness around my cock, that soft muzzle of his, the way he pressed into me while we

(made love)

fucked. I sit in class and try to express my memories in abstract doodles, covering a page with them and only realizing when the students around me get up that I have no idea what was covered.

Tuesday I fail a test.

Wednesday Randy asks me if I'm in love. I punch him in the stomach. We get into it and I feel better for about an hour. Afterwards, we go out for beers and I'm lost again.

Thursday I give up on classes and track down that cheerleader. I figure maybe some good old-fashioned normal sex will get the damn fox out of my mind. She's a perky raccoon, with a great rack and a great attitude, and she's a fucking lousy lay. I set a land speed record getting out the door after it's over.

Friday I give up and go back to the bar with the guys.

We're sitting in our group and the girls are in theirs and the squirrel's at the bar, alone. I can't follow the conversation, and eventually the guys stop trying to include me. I wander over to the squirrel and stand beside her, one paw on the stool the vixen—the fox was sitting on a week ago.

She looks around to see if there's anyone else there, then gives me the wide eyes again. "Buy a gal a drink?"

"Yeah." I signal the bartender. "Shot of Wild Turkey and one of whatever she's having." I lay down the money.

Interested now, the squirrel straightens up. I try not to gag on her perfume. "You went off with that fox, right? Back for something with less bite?" Her prominent incisors show as she laughs.

I wince. Even the conversation the boys were having about which superhero movie is the best was better than that, and that one consisted mostly of quoting their favorite bits with gunshot noises. "Do you know her? The fox who was in here last week?"

The bartender sets down my shot, and some light beer in front of the squirrel. I down my shot before he has a chance to walk away. The squirrel sneers. "No, I didn't know the stuck-up priss."

"Fine. Enjoy the beer." I stand up and walk out, ignoring her muttered "asshole" and Randy's "hey, Dev." For a minute, outside in the night, I worry that he'll follow me, but maybe he remembers Wednesday and doesn't want to get into it again. He'd rather be in the arms of one of the two big-breasted bitches at the other end of the bar. I wish that was all I wanted.

I try to find the row house again, but there are no numbers on the street and they all look alike. I don't even know why I'm looking. I want to yell at the fox. I want to hold him. I want to grab him by the throat and tell him to get the fuck out of my head. I want to kiss him again. A ferret asks me if I'm lost as I wander from one front porch to another, and I say, "Pal, you don't know the half of it." He leaves me alone.

I find what I'm sure is the right house three times. Each time I stand there for fifteen minutes trying to figure out if the pattern of the peeling paint is familiar or not. I peer at the names on the mailboxes, but I don't even know the little fucker's name, and they don't put "Little faggot fox" on the listings. Plenty of people come home while I'm looking around the porches, but only one fox, and she is definitely a vixen. For real.

At 12:30 in the morning I find a cross street that looks exactly the same as the street I've been wandering up and down for two hours. I look at all the row houses on that street and find the right house two more times.

At 1:30 in the morning I go back to the bar and snag the first girl I see who isn't attached and isn't the painted squirrel. I take her back to my room and we go at it, and it's fine. It's not great. It's not fireworks. I kick her out at 3, get back to bed and lie there staring at the ceiling. I get the crazy idea that if I bring a pair of binoculars and look through the upper story windows, I could find the ceiling that has the specific pattern of water damage I remember and then I'd know where he lives. I go so far as to check online to see where I can get a pair of binoculars close by, and I realize that I have gone completely around the bend. I'm sitting at my desk at four in the fucking morning shopping for binoculars so I can look for the ceiling of the apartment where I had the only gay experience of my life. Not to mention how crazy I would look walking up and down the street looking through third floor windows. Lion Christ.

I need to find that fox. I want him out of my head, and one way or another, I'm gonna get what I want.

Saturday practice is another disaster. I'm running on two hours sleep and coach bumps me down to the second team for the last drills of the day, where I get paired with a frosh backup wideout who is a red fox. He's not my fox, though; he's about six feet tall and only has to tilt his head a bit to look me in the eye. Plus he's got a deep voice. But he has the same slender muzzle, and twice I get caught imagining it sliding over my cock and lose my focus.

I wait to take my shower until the rest of the team is gone.

I don't know what to do. I retrace my steps from the bar the next day, this time borrowing Randy's car and finding the right street, absolutely for sure this time. I park at seven o'clock and sit in the car watching the whole street, everyone who comes and goes.

Eight-thirty. A policewolf comes over and asks if I need any help. I say I'm waiting for a friend from the football team. He checks my ID and leaves me alone. Thank god there are some fans in this town.

Nine-twenty. Two male foxes show up, laughing and talking. They walk right past my car and go into the building three doors down. Neither one is him. I'm pretty sure. I make a note of the building anyway.

Ten-forty-three. I sit up in my seat. It's him. There's no question. He's dressed in a trim blue button-down shirt and jeans, carrying a worn backpack over one shoulder. No pretense of being a woman now. My claws extend, punching holes in Randy's seat. I can't see his expression, but I know he's got that cocky smile on him.

It isn't until he's halfway to my car that I register that he's not alone. He's walking with some freakishly tall mustelid, ferret or weasel or something, and damn if the first thing I feel isn't *what the fuck is he doing with that guy?* Of course, what I mean by that, I rationalize, is if they go into a building together, it might be the weasel's place.

They don't. They pause at the front of one of the houses. The fox climbs the first stair so he can look his weasel friend in the eye. They talk for a few minutes and then the weasel moves on.

And that's the right house, I remember now. That door frame, that old piece of tape on the window. My heart beats faster.

The fox goes inside. The weasel clears the street and turns the corner, out of sight. I get out of the car.

I walk to the house just like I live there. Big problem: the door's locked. I stare through the door. There are names on the mailboxes, but the apartment numbers just go 1, 2, 3. I can't figure out whether he's R.Michaelson or W.Farrel. And I can't get in. No problem. I'll just go through the fire escape.

It occurs to me yet again, as I find the hallway window ajar and squirm my way through it, that I am pretty far gone. Fortunately, I'm also far past caring.

I might not have recognized the building, but when I get to the third

floor, I know which door is his. It might have a tiger magnet in it, with the force it's pulling me to it. I knock before I know what I'm doing, before I've figured out what I'm going to say. I can't wait a minute longer, and besides, I could stand here for another four hours and not figure out what I'm going to say.

His scent hits me a moment before he opens the door. I get a moment of surprise in his baby blues before he sizes up the situation and relaxes into a smile. "Well. Devlin Miski. How did you get in?"

I'm thrown off guard by him knowing my name. "Uh. Fire escape."

There's a twinkle of humor looking back at me now. "I see. Back for more, or back to beat up the faggot?"

I can't give voice to the maelstrom of emotions in my chest. "What the fuck are you playing at?" I yell, louder than I mean to.

His eyes flick to the opposite door, and he shrugs. "The jocks at this school crack me up. You're Division II football, for the love of God. You're not even in sniffing distance of playing professionally, but you strut around like you own this town. Despite our enlightened culture, you still go around making faggot jokes and beating up queers."

He's talking about that incident last year that everyone's forgotten about. "I had nothing to do with that! And Coach kicked the guys off the team."

"Yeah, well." He shrugs again. "Getting kicked off the football team. Whoop de doo. I got a kick out of the idea that I'd get one of you in bed, so I could tell my friends about it, maybe give you something to think about."

"Just one?"

Again, the slight hesitation, and now I'm quick enough to see him surprised before he recovers. "Look, whatever you want, let's get it over with, okay?"

"I don't know what I want!" I howl. My claws are out and in, out and in, and my tail is lashing.

He looks at me and gives me the throaty Lauren Bacollie again. "Well, handsome, come back and see me when you do."

He starts to close the door. I can't let him walk away and I can't follow him. I can't sleep with women and I can't sleep with guys. I'm caught in between worlds and it's tearing me to pieces.

I wedge my foot into the door. He backs away a couple steps. I scream at him, "You've ruined me for women!"

We stand and look at each other for an eternity. Slowly, he gets that cocky smile on his muzzle, but there's a sad sweetness behind it too. "Oh, honey," he says, and reaches out with those gentle fingers to tickle my chin. "You were never for women."

He puts just the slightest stress on the last word. I stare at him. I want to wipe that smile off his muzzle. I want to slap his face, knock him down, make him take it back. I hate his smugness. I hate his scent. I hate the gulf between us, the fact that he's standing so perfectly in his world, where he belongs, and that I no longer know where I belong.

I hate the fact that he's right.

I step into his apartment and grab him. He squirms in the half-second before I press my muzzle to his, then he melts into the kiss.

I'd forgotten.

It's like a drink of water after a full practice. It's stepping into air conditioning on a hot summer day. It's a steaming cup of hot chocolate with frost on the windows. It's all that combined, times a hundred. It's passion. It's fireworks. It's so good I forget everything, even where I am, until I hear the slam of the door behind me and feel the fox's leg withdrawing from kicking it shut.

I look down into his sparkling blue eyes and he's grinning that smug, cocky grin again. So I pick him up and carry him over to the bed to do exactly what I know he wants me to do.

Goddamn foxes.

Lee's Guide to Football (Lee)

When I was seven, I had a bunch of classmates ask me whether I wanted the Devils or the Firebirds to win the championship. I didn't know what they were talking about. My dad liked football, but I liked stories, and I may have said a couple things I shouldn't have about people who liked to watch thugs run around on a field and hit each other. So while my mom was combing the playground sand out of my face and chest and tail, my dad started to explain football to me.

Even though I was still at that age where I wanted to be like my dad, I didn't have much interest in football. But with the championship coming up, he thought it was the perfect time to get me started. Whatever else he's done in his life—and I've run through the list more than once—he got me into football. So if you're one of those kids who likes chess and books, listen up, because reading this story you're in the middle of is like growing up in Nicholas Dempsey Middle School. You don't have to like football to get through it, as my dad told me, but it helps.

See, what I always hated about football was that I was bad at it. I'd only played one football game up to then, at camp. I didn't understand the rules. To me, it was just a stupid excuse for big kids to beat up little kids. What my dad told me is that football is actually like a chess game.

Hang on. Stay with me. Imagine you've got these eleven guys. Each one can move in a certain way. You want to advance your position (symbolized by the football) up the field, either by giving it to a piece and having him carry it forward, or by passing it to a piece down the field. The guys who line up right at the boundary are the offensive line—like a bulwark. Behind them stands the quarterback, and behind him the halfback (or running back) and fullback. They're the ones who will carry the ball if you choose to run it. Out to the edges are the speedy guys whose job is to run down the field and be ready if you choose to throw the ball: the wide receivers and tight end.

Your quarterback is like a queen (and believe me, more of them are than you'd think). He's the most powerful piece and he directs the offense. Wolves and lions make good quarterbacks, because they have this inbred pack mentality. The offensive line is like pawns: they only move a very short distance, and their job is to protect the queen. You get big, aggressive guys in there, like bears and boars, because they also have to move the

defenders in such a way as to leave room for the running back to run through. This is harder than it sounds, but I'm not going to get into it. The tight end (yes, we've all heard the jokes) either helps block or runs a short way down the field to act as a receiver.. Then you've got the running back and fullback, wolverines and horses most often, who are like the bishops: they have to move through the spaces cleared by the pawns. The knights would be the tight end and the slot receiver, who can either help defend or jump short distances down the field. And wide receivers are rooks, who take advantage of long open columns to run down the field. For all those last ones, you get deer, cheetahs, and foxes. And what you have to do with these pieces is design a strategy that will help you gain ground, program a series of moves in advance, and watch them go. Meanwhile, our opponent has his own eleven guys, and he's trying to figure out what your guys are going to do so he can stop them.

If you're defending, your aim is to stop the progress of the other team. This is the part of football I hated, by the way, because I could never tackle, and they could flatten me with one arm. The QB starts out with the ball, so you go after him. You look at the situation on the field, you look at the way the pieces are set up, and you set up your guys to hopefully disrupt what the offense is doing. Your defensive line, setting up across from the offensive line, is actually attacking, which is why the best ones tend to be large, fast predators, like big cats. Then you have a bunch of guys that stay behind the defensive line to mess with the wide receivers and tight end if they get back into that territory. The best ones there are medium-weight predators, like coyotes, bigger foxes, and cheetahs. And because it's such a big field, you have to decide things like do you assign one defender to each specific offensive player, or do the defenders just cover sections of the field, and so on.

And then, not to make things more complicated, but there's everything else, which is called "special teams." If a team doesn't move the ball well enough on offense, they end up kicking it, either to the other team (a punt) or through the goal, if they're close enough. Horses and rabbits, of course, usually do the kicking. On the other side, you need someone quick and slick to catch the kick and try to run it back, and while you get a couple rabbits who are good at this, the best ones have always been weasels and otters.

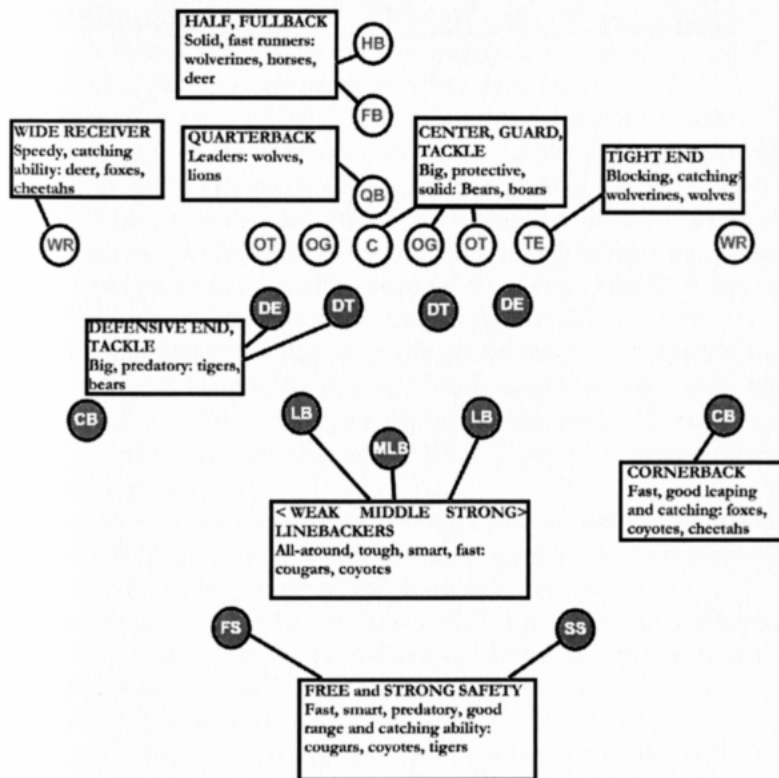
The thing that makes football more interesting than chess is that the

pieces can actually think (well, some of them) and make decisions on the field. They know what they're supposed to do, but if they see something that'll block them, they can make an adjustment and change it. Sometimes they do really stupid things, which is fun, and sometimes they do amazing things, which is even more fun.

Also, I mean, it's guys in tight clothes. There are closeup shots of the quarterback sticking his paws under the center's tail (with some definite touching). There's muscles galore, occasional tail-grabbing, and after the plays, there's butt-patting. What's not to like?

Quick Reference Diagram

Here's how the players line up on a typical play:



Secrets (Dev)

Mid-November 2006

I've got a secret.

I've had it for a couple months now. My teammates knew I had a secret back in early October. So did coach. They still don't know what it is, and they've stopped asking. The school paper started asking me around then, and hasn't stopped. I haven't told any of them what it is.

We had our first snowfall yesterday. The snow's still on the ground as we take the field against Hilltown State. They've got this hot wideout, a cheetah named Rex Millen, he's on pace to score twenty touchdowns this year, in eleven games. Monster year.

It's cat against cat as we line up. I see him look at me and I know what he's thinking: *too big, maybe he's fast but he ain't my kinda fast, juke past him and blow him away down the field, he's just lucky, that's why he's getting the numbers, but his luck runs out today.* I know he's thinkin' that last part 'cause he says it, just as cool as the snow on the ground. "Your luck runs out today."

I grin back at him. "That's the only thing gonna be runnin' today," I tell him, and I glance up at the stands just like I do before every play.

Halfway up the student section, same seat every time, there's a fox. She's wearing a white blouse, maroon skirt, and if I'm lined up on the right side of the field, I can see the intensity of her bright blue eyes. If I look up while I'm on the bench, she's talking to the ringtail and weasel next to her, or sometimes she's looking back at me, but it's more relaxed, more casual, and I might get a smile then. Not when we're starting a play. She's watching me, and I look to make sure she's watching me, and then I line up.

I hear them hike the ball, but it's a distant sound. What I'm lookin' for is the motion ahead of me. He fidgets, this one, can't keep still, except when the play's about to start. I can see the focus in his eyes, and his tail stops moving. One second, almost exactly. Then I know where he's going and I beat him there.

I'm allowed to hit him within five yards. I take two steps and bump him, throw off his pattern, then I go where I guess he's going. If the quarterback's good, he sees the play is busted and he doesn't make the

throw.

They've got a new QB, a big black wolf. He's good. But he's a freshman. He sees the busted play in the middle of his release, panics, tries to change direction, loses the ball. Fumble. Geoff, one of the two bulls on our defensive line, drops on it.

Eck is a coyote, my counterpart on the other side of the field. "He's gonna have to watch that play a couple hundred times," he says, and we laugh the laugh of guys who've been strapped down in front of game film themselves. We sit down on the bench, I look up into the stands, and get a smile.

I don't make any picks that game. There's one I coulda had, but it's late in the game and my paws are tired and it goes off my fingertips. I hold Rex to two catches, twelve yards total, before they give up on throwing it to him. He keeps up the trash talk all game, but by the fourth quarter he's on the bench and coach is giving some frosh a chance. Coach puts Eck on the rook and me on the other side, but the game's over at that point anyway.

We're 7-1 midway through November. That's pretty good, case you don't know.

The guys razz me a bit. "Hey, Dev, no picks today, what'sa matter?"

"I felt bad for the kid," I tell 'em, grinning.

Randy, a big wolf who's my roommate and our middle linebacker, elbows me. "Maybe you should start comin' to the Fang with us again."

They all wonder if that's my secret, that I don't go to the meat market on Fridays anymore. Randy thinks he knows, but he hasn't told anyone, unless you count hints like that one. Hard to keep a secret from your roommate. Not so hard with Randy, maybe, but still hard.

So I give him little hints here and there. Not deliberately, just enough that he can fit together the puzzle in not quite the right way. I hate to admit it, but I'm starting to have fun doin' it.

Course, when it comes to bein' sneaky, I've got the best teacher.

August 2006

I've been sitting in Randy's car for almost an hour. The 32-oz Powerade is all gone; even with the windows down, I'm panting in the heat.

I know the name of the street I'm on, this time. And I know that the house I'm staring at and have been staring at for the last 56 minutes, according to the car's little LED clock, is the right one. I know a lot more than I did last spring, when I was sitting in this same car on this same street.

What I still don't know is what the fuck to do.

Two long months at home, on vacation from school, football, and this house. The first week was bad, but it slowly got better, and yesterday when I got back to school, I thought, I don't need to go back.

But all day yesterday, through orientation, lunch, warm-ups, I kept thinking that it wouldn't hurt to drive by. Most of the students probably aren't even back yet. Just to see if the house is still there.

All day yesterday and all day today, I fought the urge, and then, because we have the afternoon off, I asked Randy if I could borrow his car. I drove by the house fifty-seven minutes ago, stopped, and I haven't moved since. Twice I opened my door, once even put a paw out onto the street, then both times dropped back into the seat and slammed the door. I want to go up to the door, want it with a physical hunger. I want to drive away, to erase this complication from my life. I want, most of all, to be told what I want.

Two minutes later, just under the hour mark, the door of the house opens. The fox in a sleek peach-colored sundress stands in the doorway and smiles down at me. I get shivers all down my spine that make my tail curl, and there's no longer any doubt. Not with that smile and those blue eyes. My body, for a moment, is no more than a living memory shaped by those chocolate-brown paws.

I'm out of the car, up the front stairs, and standing at the door in no time, looking down into those eyes, and there's a sparkle in them that sets me tingling all over.

"That's a new dress, Lee," I murmur.

"I bought it for you," says the low, husky voice I've heard only in my dreams for two months. I take her slender shoulders in my paws and lean down for a kiss.

I have to close my eyes. The scent, the tongue, the paws sliding around me, the slight shiver in the body as my paws hold tight...

Good for me? Fuck, no.

Just good.

Mid-November 2006

I get rid of Randy pretty easily. He's got things to do, and so do I. I know I'm not exactly inconspicuous as I walk down the street, but I'm relaxed, more confident, and I act like I belong there, just as I've been taught to. No school gear, no football jacket, just a six-foot-tall tiger strolling down the street.

I still look around to see if anyone's watching before I hurdle the steps to the house. In the shade of the porch, I ring the bell, and even though the fox lives on the third floor, I don't even have to wait for a minute before I'm following that bushy red tail up two flights of stairs. With each step, I

get more and more excited, and by the time we get to the top, I'm bouncing on my heels and I get a smile and a husky, "Patience," as chocolate paws open the door and usher me inside.

We kiss again inside, and those paws trace my midriff, lifting my shirt, diving down my pants without hesitation. I moan as they caress me through my briefs, a throaty growl of a moan that brings a soft chuckle in reply. I keep my paws busy tracing that slim, taut rump, lifting the tail and unfastening the skirt in back.

It falls to the floor with barely a sound. My paws slide over the bare fur under the tail, around the hips, and to the front. Beneath the silky white blouse, the plush white fur comes to a peak at a shapely ridge of white. Below it, a white-furred sac, and above, a hard pink shaft mirroring mine.

I pull him close so I can feel him all against me. He rubs his erection into my leg while his paws trace the length of mine. That's a big secret. But it's not my biggest secret.

August 2006

This is the moment where I hesitate. It's been two months, and feeling another cock against me is back to feeling as weird as it did in April. No, maybe not quite that weird, but strange enough to make me hesitate.

He leans his head back and the smile curving back to the corners of his muzzle is as familiar as his scent and the touch of his paws. "What's the matter?" he taunts me, lightly. "Been picturing me as a vixen for two months?"

"No," I snap back. "I just..."

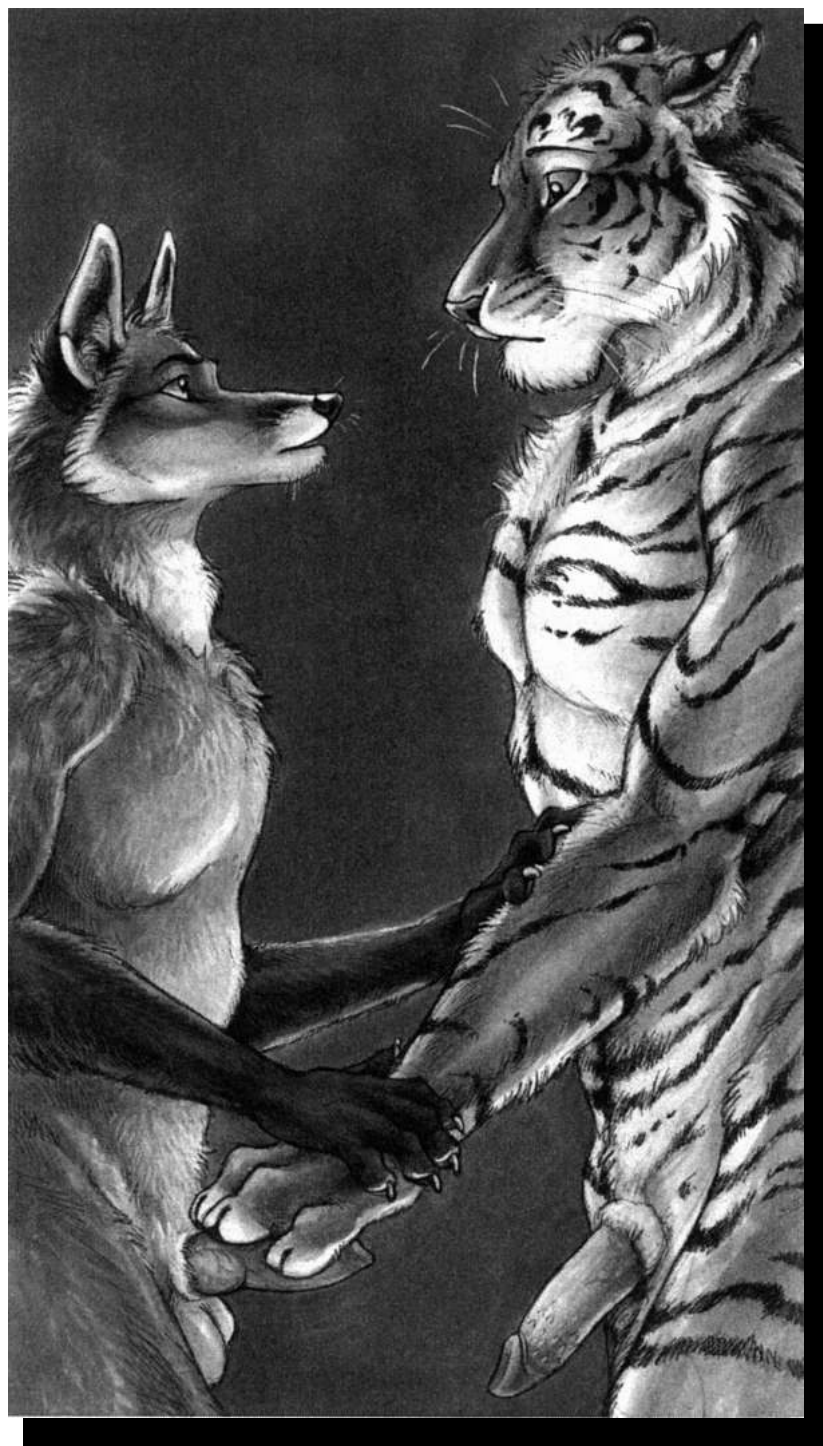
Before I know what he's doing, he's taken my paw in his and put it right on his shaft. 'There you go,' he says, 'in case you'd forgotten what it feels like.'

How could I? I just look down at him, without moving my paw. My pads tingle where they touch the warm flesh. And the strangeness is fading as my memory comes back, takes over, pulls me to him again.

'That's better,' he murmurs, and nuzzles my chest as I start to slide my paw up and down, remembering the feel of him and discovering it anew. It's nice to get that expression on his muzzle too, the closed eyes and soft, blissful smile. There's only one expression I like seeing more, and I have a feeling I'll be seeing it again before too long.

Eventually, he opens his eyes and touches my nipple with his cold nose, then his warm tongue. I shiver, and he nips, tugging the small button and then releasing it as he drops to his knees. The small paw holds me while his warm tongue laps slowly up my length.

This is the part where I have to brace myself against the wall.



He takes me all the way into his muzzle, warmth and bliss pounding in waves against me. Whatever rocky resistance I had to him has long since been worn to sand. At some point, I start making a throaty growl of pleasure. I don't remember consciously doing it, but I can hear it, and I can tell from the flick of his ears that he can, too.

I'm breathing hard and my tail is lashing all over the place.

He stands up, steps back from where the peach dress is lying on the floor, and lets me look him up and down. I do, hungrily, drinking in the five-feet-and-change body, slender, probably half my weight. All white down the front, his chest puffed out with fur, not muscle. A stomach I could circle with both paws. Russet fur from a distance, but up close it's three different shades of orange, some as dark as brown, some almost yellow. Reminds me of the leaves in fall.

I never knew another guy could be that gorgeous. Or turn me into a fucking poet.

He wraps one brown paw around my slick shaft and tugs, not too gently pulling me to the bed. I growl a bit and play at resisting before following. His smile says "who are you kidding" without having to let the words pass his lips.

At the bed, he pushes on my chest with one gentle paw. I've had two hundred and fifty pounds of wolf push against me and not given up ground. I go down on the bed and lie on my back like a bunny.

He climbs on top of me, straddling my stomach and wagging that soft, long, fluffy tail over my shaft. I put my paws on his hips.

Mid-November 2006

His long pink member bobs in front of my nose. Just like diving off the high dive, I make up my mind and move forward before my better judgment can stop me, tongue out, eyes closed. I can smell his musk just fine, and when the tip of my tongue brushes his underside, I can hear the shift in his breathing.

It's not nearly as bad as I've told myself it would be. It's sort of like licking myself, but smaller, and stronger smelling. I lick again, keeping my momentum now that I've gotten started, and I can feel the slightest tremble in his hips as I push my tongue up, letting his shaft drop back against it before I lick up again.

Damn. This is kinda fun.

I feel the whole length, starting at the base and getting a good noseful of his scent in the process. My tongue is big enough to cup his shaft in it, and I do so, rubbing up and down and holding his legs in place 'cause he's starting to squirm. I give it to him for a bit longer and then open my eyes to

look up at him.

His tongue is hanging out of the side of his muzzle and he grins down at me when I stop. "There you go," he said. "Not so bad, was it?"

I grin back. "You tell me."

"Not too bad. For your first time." He touches my nose with a fingertip. "It's all about practice."

"Yeah, yeah." I know he's just teasing. So I squeeze him around the hips and purr, "Speaking of practice, isn't it about time you practice stretching that tight little hole of yours?"

"If I saw you more than once a week, it wouldn't be so tight," he purrs back. For a fox, he purrs like a pro.

"If I saw you more than once a week," I gasp as he sits back, wiggling his tight little rump a lot more than is really needed to get my aching member into him, "I wouldn't have enough energy left to play football."

Warmth surrounds me. The movement of his slinky body on top of me and the tightness gripping my cock, all of it sends shivers through me, making my fur ultra-sensitive to every touch. His tail brushing my legs is a lover's caress. His paws on my stomach and chest are bliss. And when he whispers something like "I'll have to test that theory sometime," and leans over to kiss me, all the words I know are driven out of my head. All I can do is hold his sides, hold him against me, and drive my hips up again and again into that amazing warmth.

Somewhere in there my paw gets wrapped around his shaft, and I'm milking it eagerly. The motion feeds back into my sensations, and I can feel the roar working in my throat as everything just gets better and better. I hold on, wanting it to last, but it slips away, upward and outward, and I roar into his muzzle, feeling his body shake with my passion and his own.

Until last April, I used to say that picking off a pass and returning it for a score was better than sex.

I don't say that any more.

August 2006

"Why don't you wear panties?" I ask. We're lying in bed naked, still panting and messy, but uncoupled. His apartment doesn't have any air conditioning, and even with the windows open, the heat is stifling. I've been tracing my paws along the lines of his fur and he's been painting my stripes with his brown fingers. For the moment, my confusion is gone.

"You want me to?" he parries, his fingers lightly teasing, blue eyes fixed on

mine.

"I don't know," I say. "I was just asking."

He studies me for a moment longer, and then grins. "I don't get off on it," he said. "It's just so I can see you in public."

"You bought a new dress." My paw is resting on his spent and sticky sheath as I say it. I'm dimly aware that in another life, another me would cut his paw off rather than put it on another guy's cock. I hope that other me doesn't remember this moment, if he comes back.

"Do you know how heavy that skirt is? It's ninety degrees out. I'd die."

"So you bought a dress just to be able to kiss me at the door?"

"Well," he says, "would you be rubbing my sheath if I'd answered the door in my t-shirt and Dockers?"

I give him another purposeful rub. "Sure."

"Sure," he echoes, and then slides away from me, towards the bathroom.

"Want to hop in the shower?"

I watch him stand up and all those thoughts about leaves come back as he smooths his fur. But the shower... we've never showered together. He's never asked.

"No, it's okay," I say.

He tilts his muzzle. "You'll fit," he says. "You've showered here before." "I know. I just don't want to." And because I don't want to tell him the real reason, I say, "Just leave it."

Out comes the dreaded arched eyebrow. "So you'll fuck a guy up the ass, but won't clean up with him afterwards? Don't you shower with your football buddies all the time?"

I had forgotten the way he seems to know exactly what I'm thinking and cuts right to it. He should be pre-med, I've told him, the way he makes incisions. 'Yeah, Doc, and maybe I don't want to be thinking about this shower in that shower. Okay?'

"Okay, stud," he says. 'Stud' is his name for me when he's mad at me because I'm being a dumb jock. 'Doc' is my name for him when he's over-analyzing me. The use of the old names from last spring is reassuring and familiar, even though we're just fuck-buddies.

He shrugs, and walks into the bathroom, swaying his tail behind him and swinging that cute butt back and forth. At the door, he stops and poses and says, in that Lauren Bacollie voice, "If you change your mind, just come on in."

I'm halfway to the bathroom before I remind myself why I shouldn't go in. I'm at the door before I actually make myself stop.

Two weeks later, late summer breezes that rattle the leaves outside rustle

past his blinds and cool the apartment. My fingers mirror their movement inside, through the softness of his fur. He's lying on his stomach, muzzle turned towards me, paws under the pillow, letting me stroke him. I have the impression that it was a little painful for him this time, but he hasn't said anything and I haven't asked.

"I saw you at the game," I say after a couple minutes.

The corners of his muzzle wrinkle. 'There's a reason I wore that outfit and sat in the front row. It still took you two whole quarters to notice.'

It was true; I hadn't seen him 'til we were running in at halftime. "It was our first game. I know, just preseason, but I was excited."

"You certainly weren't concentrating on defense."

That one stings. "I had a good game."

"You know," he says, one blue eye piercing me, "I've seen these muscles up close and personal. I know what you can do and when you're just going through the motions."

"Going through the motions?"

"Mm-hmm." His tail sways slowly from side to side. "First play of the second quarter. You let that puma get past you. You could've stopped him easy. You were lucky he dropped the ball."

I open my muzzle to say something, but then I remember the play, and I close it again. He goes on. "You're not in any danger of losing your job. Your partner, though, what's his name, Mike? If he doesn't shape up, that coyote will be starting before October."

Coach had yelled that at Mike, the other defensive back, but he'd yelled it in the locker room and I haven't mentioned it. I trace the curve of his spine with a claw, and he shivers. "What else?"

He yawns. "You're sloppy lining up. Looks like you're joking with that wolf and you just kind of get close to your spot."

"So?" I'm starting to freak out a little bit. It's like I was just fucking my coach.

"So they put you in a spot for a reason. You line up a foot to one side, it throws off your moves."

"What about the rest of the team?" I've got a paw on his butt and I move it back up to his back, not wanting to remember the sex while we're talking about football.

He blinks, slowly. "I was only watching you. I didn't know I was supposed to report on the whole team."

"You know a lot about football."

Now there's a definite smile to his muzzle. "I've watched guys prance around in tight pants since I was eleven. It's pretty, but it gets boring if you don't think about it some."

"Don't you like me better out of the tight pants?" He just grins at me. I relax a little. "What does it matter, anyway? Why not just have fun? Weren't you the one who said we're all Division II jocks with no sniff of playing professionally?"

His blue eyes meet mine and his ears flick back, then forward. "Well," he says softly, "I guess I'm not always right."

"That's a relief " I say, and he snaps back with something about a higher batting average and I ask him what sport he thinks I play, anyway.

And I begin to glimpse my secret, dimly.

October 2006

The phone rings. We got caller ID last month, so I say, "Hi, Mom," as I pick it up.

"Hi, sweetie," Mom says. "How are you? Are you nervous?"

"No. It's just another game."

"Because we all think it's just wonderful what you're doing, but if you don't play well today, it's okay."

I wish our new phone had a cord I could wrap around my paw as I start to pace around the room. "What do you mean, if I don't play well?"

"Oh, I'm sure you will, sweetie," she says unconvincingly. "I just don't want you to feel bad if you don't."

"How's Gregory?" I ask, because I'd rather hear her babble for five minutes about my brother in law school than listen to any more of the excruciating conversation about how I'm going to fail eventually. I get my wish. Then I get to talk to my dad.

Nice play last couple games," he says.

"Thanks." Been working out more?"

I'm certainly not telling my parents my secret. I give them the line I give the paper. "Things just started to click."

"Hm." There's a moment's pause, and then he says, "If you'd played like that in high school, you'd be at North State now."

"Come on, Dad," I say, trying to make a joke out of it. "My grades weren't bad enough for North State."

He just grunts and says, "Coulda played wherever you want."

I'm tired of this conversation, too. "How's the garage?"

I get a couple clipped comments, another few lines with Mom, and then I tell them I need to run off to morning practice. Which I do, but not for another half hour. I sink back into bed and sigh. Aren't parents supposed to make you feel good?

The phone rings again.

It's my turn to soap now. When I'm done rubbing the shampoo into Lee's backfur, I lift up his tail. I like the way he shivers when I rub under there, just a tiny twitch. Probably he thinks I don't notice, or maybe he wants me to think that he thinks I don't notice. Anyway, it's cute, so I do it a lot. Three times during this shower alone.

"We're working really hard on this play," he says unexpectedly.

"Which one?"

"Square Room," he says. "It's a dram-mmmmmmmmma." I chose that moment to soap up under his tail, and I leave my paw there as he leans back into it. If we hadn't just spent ourselves half an hour ago, I'd leave it there longer. As it is, I feel a little stirring, and when I reach around to soap between his legs, he's not fully relaxed either. But it's been a long day, and we're both tired.

"It's about a family of foxes. The father uncovers something in the mother's past and the family has to work through it." He helps me rinse, getting me back for my groping with a squeeze of my sheath. "It's a pretty talky piece. Probably not really your speed."

"Probably not," I say agreeably, helping brush the soap from his fur. I feel way too mellow to rise to his bait.

He switches gears as we rub down with towels. "Is Tuesday the day you don't have practice?"

"Yeah."

He grins up at me. "Where do you eat lunch?" "Why?" I know why, I'm just stalling.

He knows that, and snorts. "So I can tell the West Hillman coach where to poison your food before next week's game. What do you think?"

"I don't know," I say slowly.

"It's not a math problem," he says.

"I know. Then I could just look up the answer."

He huffs. "Think about it. I'm going to bed."

I join him in bed, knowing that whatever he wants, I'll end up giving him.

He sits down across from me in the Maple Hall cafeteria, 12:02 pm on Tuesday. If it weren't for the blue eyes and the confidence with which he

sits down, I might not recognize him: he's wearing, not a blouse, but a collared shirt that lets only a small puff of his white chest fur show, and his butt, instead of being a suggestive curve under a skirt, is tightly defined by his jeans, leaving very little to my already-exploding imagination.

I've never looked at a guy that way in public before. I wonder if people can tell.

"Nice day," he says, glancing outside where the leaves are just starting to turn, spots of yellow in the green, and the blue sky behind them.

"Yeah," I say, taking another bite of turkey tetrazini.

"Oh, stop worrying." He pitches his voice low. "Nobody cares that we're eating together."

"What if someone saw me going to your place," I say, very low, "and then sees me here. And puts it together?"

He wrinkles his nose at the first bite he lifts to his muzzle, pops it in with a faintly disgusted look. "I think you give the students here far too much credit," he says while chewing. "The brainiacs in my building still think I'm rooming with my sister."

"Really?"

He nods. "One of them said to me the other day, 'hey, you know your sister has a big boyfriend who comes over when you're out. '"

I feel cold worry clamp my stomach. "They saw me?"

"You're not exactly invisible. Anyway, I told him, 'she's my sister, not my girlfriend. She's a big girl. ' And that was the end of that." He shrugs and takes another bite. "So chill."

"Easy for you to say, doc," I grumble. "You're not risking anything."

"I'm risking having a studly boyfriend on the football team." He tosses off a smile which I don't register immediately because I can't fucking believe he just said that out loud, even if he did whisper it.

"Shhh!!" I hiss, panicked.

The smile shifts to one of his cocky grins. "Chill," he says. "Nobody's close enough to hear. I know. I have excellent hearing myself."

"Well, listen to this," I snarl, aware that fear is giving my voice an edge I don't necessarily want it to have. "This was a stupid idea and I don't want to do it again."

I watch his ears fold back, but he only gives me that shrug and says, "Fine."

We eat in silence for a bit, and then are interrupted by two young

coyote girls who want to know if I'm really on the football team and if I'm really Devlin Miski, who returned an interception for the winning score against St. Francis two weeks ago. Lee mutters something about my four interceptions last week, but they don't appear to be able to see or hear him, so I nod and smile, and thank them for watching. They ask if I can introduce them to Eck, and I tell them to come on down to the Fang on Friday night if they want to meet him.

"See?" he says as they walk away. "I'm invisible."

I can't tell whether he's pleased about that or not. When he wants to be neutral, he's very hard to read. "To them," I say, but for whatever reason, the fear and panic has subsided. "But they're just girls, after all."

I know he has a little misanthropic streak, and sure enough, he grins in response. "Looking for a daddy. They saw what they wanted and put the blinders on."

I hate to say it, but the rest of the lunch is really pretty pleasant. We talk about our classes and stuff we never talk about in bed, and by the time he gets up to run to his World Civilizations seminar, I don't even blink when he says, "Next week?" I just nod.

I watch him leave, and as I'm putting my tray on the conveyor belt and thinking about our lunch, I remember the smile he gave me, the one when he called me his boyfriend. I would've thought he would be wearing his possessive smile, or his I'm-saying-something-to-shock-you smile, or his cocky, cleverer-than-you smile, but it was none of those. It was, as far as I could tell, a genuine, full-on, I'm-happy smile, and as I stroll out into the crisp fall air, I wonder if my little fox has some secrets of his own.

I want to go to the play by myself, but Randy is all curious about why I want to see something called "The Square Room," and I can't stop him from coming along. He looks dubious when we get there and see the hand-painted signs and the hand-painted bunny handing out flyers. She, on the other paw, doesn't blink an eye, just smiles with both teeth and hands us the playbill, a folded-over photocopy.

Randy looks even more dubious when mine doesn't follow his into the trash can just inside the doors. I don't notice his look until I've found the name "Wiley Farrel" on the cast list. Then I see him looking at me out of the corner of his eye, and I shove the paper casually into my pocket.

My fox is not the lead in the play, but he's the main supporting

character, and he's good. I wish I knew more about theater so I could tell him that, the way he knows about football. All I know is if I hadn't read his name in the program, I wouldn't know it was him. Even in the dress.

Randy sits quietly through the first act, in which the main characters fight and the wife retreats to her bedroom. My fox plays the teenaged daughter, and I think I understand why he is playing a girl: the parents are both foxes. There must be a shortage of vixens in the troupe, and the wife is the larger part. She's not bad, but my fox is great.

In the second act, Randy gets restless and starts fidgeting, then whispering things to me like, "Why did she only brush part of her tail?" and "Is that supposed to be a lemon pie?" and "Why does he put up with her? If it was me, I'd break the door down!" I try to ignore him, but I find myself agreeing with him. When my fox isn't on stage, my attention wanders, and I can't honestly say I understand the bleak ending. But we clap along with the rest of the crowd when it's over and ignore the whispers of the people around us who were offended by our talking. Hey, if the play were better, they'd be able to tune us out.

We go down to Smokey's afterwards, a bar for drinking, not a meat market. Randy slurps his Coors and I get a Miller, and he grins at me. "So that's it, huh?"

"What?" It looks like he thinks he's figured out something.

"You're seeing that vixen, huh? That's who the phone calls are from?"

I get a cold shiver. It takes me a couple seconds to remember that there were two vixens in the play, because I can only think of my faux-vixen. "Which one?" I ask cagily.

"Hey," he says, "It's okay with me if you wanna get serious outside your species. No worries about cubs or anything, right?" Good old Randy, always getting right to the heart of the matter.

The good thing is, he just wanted to know. And now that he does, or thinks he does, he's content. He knows something the rest of the team doesn't. I figure I'll take him to a couple more plays, keep him happy, hopefully stop him from asking too many questions. Let him think he knows my secret. He's closest of anyone, and still not close enough that I'm worried.

Until two weeks later, when I return to the room to find him sitting on his bed, talking to my fox in blouse and skirt.

I stop dead in the doorway, muzzle hanging partway open. Randy's tail is wagging, making thumping sounds against the bed. "Hey," he says, grinning so wide I expect to see canary feathers sticking out of his muzzle. "I ran into Lee outside the theater and invited her back to the room. You should bring her round more often."

"Yes, dear," he says, and I can see from the glint in his blue eyes that he's enjoying this. "You have such a charming roommate."

I look around. "I'm sorry," I say, stalling while I think of how to get him out of here without Randy getting suspicious. "Did you mean the wolf there who once tried to fart Beethoven's Fifth?"

"Oh!" Lee feigns interest. At least, I hope he's feigning. "He has a taste for the classics."

"The taste of Old Hilltown." I cross to my bed and sit down.

Randy hadn't been quite sure how to take my remark, but he'd grinned throughout. The mention of beer restored his confidence. Now he gestures to the little fridge we have. "I've got a couple left, if you want..."

"That's okay," Lee says. "I'm sure it's better in my imagination." He turns to me and gives me a smile. "No kiss?"

Oh, god. He wants to kiss in front of Randy. I look back at him and watch his smile curve up a little bit more. It seems impossible that Randy won't notice the things I can't help seeing: the slightly broader, male muzzle; the way the hips don't quite flare enough; the roughness around the base of the claws. But I can't think of a good excuse not to go over, and Randy's still grinning that I-found-you-out grin. So I walk over and lean down, intending to give him a soft, quick peck on the muzzle.

I get a muzzle full of fox tongue and an instant hard-on. We don't hold the kiss as long as we normally do, but it's plenty. I pull back and sit down hard on my bed, only dimly hearing Randy's "Wooooo!"

Lee's licking his lips and smiling. I can't believe there's no bulge under his skirt like there is in my jeans. Randy rubs his paws together. "I see what you see in her, Dev. Woof! I wish I could find a nice bitch to kiss me like that."

"Oh, I bet there's more than just bitches would kiss you like that," the fox says nonchalantly. My claws sink into the bed. Why is he doing this?

"Sure," Randy says, so calmly I can't believe it. "But I don't really like goin' outside my species. Just me personally," he says hurriedly. "Dev here, he likes sleepin' around. That's cool with me."



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Interior Illustration for "Out Of Position" by Kyell Gold

"Oh, *does* he?" Lee says, and turns to me. I still can't believe Randy didn't pick up on what he meant by the last comment. Fortunately, Randy is more worried about what *he's* said.

"Oh, I mean, he used to. But not this year. He doesn't come to the Fang no more. That's why I thought he was seeing someone seriously. I dunno why he didn't introduce us before."

"Yes, Dev, why on Earth didn't you?" The fox smiles.

"Because I wanted to keep you all to myself," I say through gritted teeth.

Randy slaps his knee and grins. "He's always like that," he says. "Won't let me copy off him in History class either."

The fox's ears flick, and I see the beginnings of trouble in his eyes. "I didn't think you had trouble passing classes anyway," he says. "Doesn't your coach take care of that?"

"Sure," Randy says, to demonstrate his one big talent besides football: saying exactly the wrong thing. Then he actually follows that up with something half-reasonable: "But we're all jealous of guys like Dev who don't need any help."

"Hey," I say, heading off the next biting comment from the fox, "how about we go grab something to drink? Or eat?" We decide on the local pizza place, which in retrospect turns out to be probably the worst idea I've had in a long time.

Lee just gets a soda. Diet, of course. Randy and I get our favorite: two slices with everything. We're chowing down, and the conversation is at least not as pointed as it had been getting in the room, when another plate flops onto the table next to me and three hundred pounds of bear slams down into the plastic chairs, which are much sturdier than they look. "Hey, Dev, hey, Randy."

"Hey, Jack." Jack is the anchor of our defensive line. And if he's here, then the other three are not far behind. I watch Lee's eyes as the other bear, the elephant, and the stallion pull chairs up to our table. They all want to meet Lee, and I introduce her as my World Cultures tutor, with a warning glance at Randy. He gives me a broad wink that only a mole—or four football players gorging on pizza—could miss.

The fox, meanwhile, is keeping his cool, but after a few minutes I notice that he's sitting a little too straight, his ears keep flicking ever so slightly around, and his tail is bushier than normal. I keep half an ear to the

conversation while I try to remember where I've seen that before. And it comes to me as I finish the last of my pizza.

The rapid ear-flicks and the bushy tail, at least, I remember from the time I barged into his building, wild-eyed, a week after our first night together, when he'd tricked me into bed. He didn't know whether I was going to kiss him or beat him up, and though he had a brave face on, as he does now, it was clear that he was a little scared. Once I realize it, it's as obvious to me as all the signs that he's male.

"Hey, Lee," I say, and his muzzle snaps over to me. "Didn't you say you have an early class tomorrow? Come on, I'll walk you home."

He looks like he wants to argue, especially when Jack says, "Ah, just sleep through it," but I reach out and take his paw, and he gets up.

"Awfully nice to meet you all," he says, the brush of his tail going down and his ears settling as well. "Hope we can do this again sometime."

Outside, he walks stiffly beside me, the chill of the wintry air nothing to what he's giving off. "So how did you—" I finally start, trying to make conversation, and he interrupts.

"Rescued the poor, helpless fairy from the big, mean, football players," he said. "That what you're thinking?" He's not using his vixen's voice, which is a little disconcerting.

"Huh?"

"Didn't I tell you that I could take care of myself?"

"What, tonight?" I'm thoroughly confused. I thought I was doing something nice by helping him out of a scary situation. I can't figure out what I did wrong.

"I certainly don't need your help to protect myself from a bunch of primitive jocks like that."

"Hey," I say. "They're not all that bright, but they're not bad guys."

"Sure," he says, "if you need a pickle jar opened or a faggot beaten up."

"Is that what this is about? I told you, those guys aren't on the team any more. We don't hang out with them."

"Oh, like it makes a difference which specific guys it was. They're all the same."

I stop, paws on my hips, and for a moment I think he's not going to stop. Then he does, a few steps further, turns and looks at me. "Well?" "What about me?"

Blue eyes narrow in the yellow light of the street lamp. A raccoon walks past us and we endure his nervous glances as he walks between us, not wanting to get in the middle of our quarrel. Whether he heard the vixen talking with a tod's voice, we can't tell, but he disappears around the corner and then Lee talks, more quietly, but no less passionately.

"Well, I've been a good influence on you, haven't I?"

"You? *You?*" Now I'm the one raising my voice, and he walks away. "Hey! Don't... Listen, I..." I'm incoherent, sputtering, trying to form the thoughts into words, and I don't want to run after him because I know that's what he wants me to do, and I curse my paws as they take me down the street and around the corner he's just turned.

"Listen, Doc," I say, "I am who I am, and... and don't take credit for how I act just because you think you're clever. It's not because of you that you didn't get beat up that night when I came back. It's because of me."

"Oh," he says in his smug voice, the one that sets my fur on end, "I think it had something to do with me."

"Christ!" I explode. "You can be such a fucking bitch sometimes!"

A white fox on the opposite side of the street turns at my words and looks at us for a moment, clearly wondering if he should intervene and hoping he won't have to. I wave him on, growling, "Sorry. It's okay," and a moment later he wraps his leather jacket around himself and moves on.

"And you, stud," Lee hisses, "can be a tremendous idiot."

He walks on. I clench my fists, willing myself to just turn around and go home. Don't follow him, I tell myself.

"Look," I say, striding alongside him. He lifts his nose just a bit and doesn't look at me. "I got you out of there because it looked like a bad situation. I was just trying to help!"

"I've told you, I don't need your help," he says.

"I know," I say. "You keep repeating yourself."

"Apparently it takes a few tries to get you to understand some things," he says tardy.

"You know," I say, "You go on about how football players like to beat up faggots and how we're just primitive jocks and yet you seem happy to sit there at a table with a bunch of them, just begging for trouble. Why would you do that, huh? Why not just leave them alone?"

"Leave them alone," he snaps. "Easy for you to say. Why don't they just leave us alone?"

For a moment, I think he means me and him, not the collective non-football-playing gay population. Things come into focus, slowly. "Why can't you let that go?"

"Just let it go. Don't think about it. How appropriate for a football player." He turns away.

I run after him, grab his shoulder. He wrenches it free and takes another couple steps. I glare at him. "That's not fair."

I can see his breath as he pants. "Neither was what happened to Brian."

"Brian's not here," I point out. "I am."

His ears go back, but not in an angry way. I see retorts flash across his eyes, but he bites them back and just turns away again.

I don't have to run to catch him, and this time, he doesn't pull away when I grab his shoulder and turn him towards me. Light mist hangs in the air between us, the fog of our breath combined with the chill of the night. His scent is strong in my nose; I can smell his anger matching mine, and all the other emotions below it. I feel like slapping him or screaming at him.

"Don't just walk away from me, dammit!" I say, louder than is necessary.

"Oh, now I'm not supposed to just let it go? Didn't you just want me to leave all those football players alone?" His eyes are piercing, challenging me, and I want to shake him, he's being so frustrating. I grab his other shoulder and he puts his paws on my stomach, bracing himself to push away from me. We freeze there.

I can feel his heat, the pounding of his heart matching the quick lashing of my tail. My paws are tight on his shoulders, my blood is hot, and I'm thinking I should've just walked away. Let us both cool off, that'd be the sensible thing to do. But I don't want to be cool. Part of my anger is knowing that he's right, and I'm sure I see in his eyes that he knows that I'm right too. But there's more in his eyes; the anger isn't uppermost anymore, though it lingers in his scent. What I see there mirrors what's battling with anger inside me, reflecting the change I can feel in my expression.

In a heartbeat, in the silence with his question hanging in the air, the tension between us changes, and we both feel it. We're both all worked up, and it doesn't matter that it was an argument that did it. We're breathing hot and heavy, warming the night, and anger and bitterness are subsumed into something else as I look back into his blue eyes and say, "No... don't let go." Then I'm crushing him to me and we're together and kissing in the

middle of the street, and the chill of the night is gone. All I can feel is his heat against mine. Our clothes might as well not even be there. I've got one paw down on his tail and he's cupping my butt in his and I thank god he's in his blouse and skirt, because I didn't even stop to think about what passersby might see.

"How many blocks to your house?" I pant raggedly when we wrench ourselves apart.

"Six," he says, tongue lolling slightly out.

"We'll get there faster if I carry you," I say, and for once, he doesn't spurn my help.

September 2006

And there's still my one big secret left to tell.

It's the morning of our first real game. Randy's ritual to kick off the season is to be hung over Saturday morning, so when the phone rings, he howls and clutches his head. "Shut it off!"

I grin and grab the phone. "Probably coach making sure we're up," I say, clicking the phone on. "Hello?"

"Hi," his voice says in my ear, low and husky. I freeze.

After a moment of silence, I get, "Hello?" His normal voice.

"Hi," I say, finally.

He chuckles.

"Surprised?"

"Yeah."

"I'll make this quick. I just wanted to remind you what you can do. I'm looking forward to being impressed today."

"You're coming?"

"Of course. I wouldn't miss it. I'll wear your favorite outfit."

I smile. The last few preseason games, he's shown up in his regular clothes, with friends. "Coming alone?"

"No, actually."

"Okay." I don't ask him to explain why his friends won't care if he dresses like a woman in public. If anyone can explain, Lee can. "I'll see you there, then."

"Make me proud." For that, he goes back to the husky feminine voice, and I'm shivering just a bit as I hang up.

I'm all ready to explain to Randy that it was a friend of mine from out of town, but he's still holding his head and moaning, and doesn't seem to care.

Game time is crazy, the stadium's packed and fans going nuts, but I spot Lee in the stands almost immediately. He's halfway up the student section, in blouse and skirt, talking with friends. We don't acknowledge each other, but I know he

sees me see him. With that done, I turn my full attention to the game.

I've been getting better through the preseason, but this game is something else. I can't even say for sure what's different, not until later. All I know is I'm remembering everything and I'm hungry for the ball. I understand for the first time what they mean when they say that the game comes to you. It's an amazing feeling.

I pick off three passes before they stop throwing to my side, and bust more plays than I can count. I even save a touchdown when I force a fumble from their running back. Mike gets torched twice for scores, but we win by a field goal anyway.

Coach gives me the game ball—my first one ever. I take it with me that night even though it's stupid, I could be recognized, but I don't care. I want him to see it.

Of course, when I get to the apartment, there are a couple other balls that demand my attention. Our clothes don't last long, and pretty soon we're on the bed and playing and talking a bit like we do. He makes some remarks about me getting lucky, and finally I say, "I'm not lucky, I'm good."

His foxy, cocky grin stretches from ear to ear. "I told you you were," he says.

"So, what," I ask, still capable of speech because although we are naked and nibbling pretty heavily against each other, he hasn't yet reached over for the lube to finish off our little play. I'm so jazzed inside I almost don't need it. 'You got some Bull Durham thing goin' on here?'"

He laughs. "I'm not that old. Do I look it?" His paw reaches to the side table.

There goes my speech center. I just shake my head. Something cool slides along my cock. Anticipation and arousal have me twitching and squirming, so I take it out on his erection, since he's takin' his sweet time. He squirms a bit, then leans in and says, "Do I feel that old?" as he sits back on me and oh dear god everything just melts away for those glorious few minutes.

When I finish my shower, he's lying under the covers, and I grab my football before joining him. He raises an eyebrow. "I'm not that loose," he says.

I flip if to him and he bobbles it, catches it against his chest. "Game ball?"

"Yeah." I scoot under the covers and grin. No, more than a grin; I can't stop my teeth from showing.

He looks shrewdly up at me. 'Your timing was off for most of the third quarter. When you thought they weren't going to throw to your side, you got lazy.'

"They weren't throwing to my side," I point out.

"Doesn't mean you can take plays off."

My ears go back, just a little. "It was hot out there."

He turns the ball over in his paws. "Hot on both sides of the field."

I slump back against the pillows. "Jesus, nobody's perfect."

"Doesn't mean you can't try to be." He brings the ball to his nose and inhales.

"I thought I was pretty good," I grouse.

"You were good," he says. "But you can be better. You have to be better at the next level."

I turn my head. His blue eyes are even with mine. "The pros?"

"Sure," he says, and places the ball carefully on the floor. "This is a good start. You going to get eleven more?"

Eleven more? "Can't I just be proud of this one?"

"You should be," he says, and yawns hugely. "I am."

He says it simply, without emphasis, as though it's the most natural thing in the world. When I don't say anything in reply, he leans up for a soft kiss, and then turns away to back up against me. I put my arm around him and pull him tight against me, trapping his bushy and still-damp tail against my chest, wiggling my sheath between his cheeks, resting my muzzle between his ears. He goes to sleep almost immediately. I lie awake.

How can two simple words keep me staring at his wall, holding my breath for fear I'll wake up and have dreamed them? How can this little fox make the best day of my life even better? I wish there were better words to say how I'm feeling. The best I can do is to say it feels like I'm stuck under his tail and living that moment of release over and over again, only the point of release is not inside my groin. It's inside my chest, and I've never felt anything like it before.

I brush the fur on his chest, not wanting to go to sleep, not wanting this moment to end, ever. I bury my nose in his fur and close my eyes and inhale. I can feel myself drifting off, and I think, I want to feel like this again. I will feel like this again. I'll make him proud of me.

And I know that I'm not just doing it for him, but also for me. I don't mind doing it for him, though; he's the one who gives me that little push that I needed, gives me something to play for. He's my Gipper, my Rudy, my dying-kid-in-the-hospital-wing.

Eleven more game balls? No sweat.

Now, I got a secret.

Dev's Game-Day Briefing (Dev)

Okay, with Lee telling you what all the players are supposed to do, I can walk you through how an actual game goes. The teams flip a coin at the beginning of the game. Winner gets to pick whether they want to kick off or receive. To receive means you start on offense and have the first chance to score. But sometimes teams want to kick off, because if you start the first half on defense, you start the second half on offense. Also if you stop the other team right away on the first drive, it gives you a lot of energy going into your offense. The coaches all figure this out. I just know I liked being first on the field.

When a team gets the ball, they line up like Lee described. They get four chances to move the ball ten yards; those are "downs." So there's first down, second down, third down, fourth down. I don't know why they're called that, they just are. Anyway, on first down usually you try to run the ball. That means the QB hands it to the RB and he tries to get ten yards up the field. Actually, if he gets four or five, that's pretty good, and then on second down you might try to run it again. If you can get three or four yards every time you run the ball, you can just run it all day long.

The thing is, though, if you don't get your ten yards in four tries, the other team gets the ball. So most of the time you only take three tries, and if you don't get ten yards, you punt. Punting is where the punter kicks the ball down the field and the other team gets to catch it and try to run back with it. Basically you do that so that they don't get the ball at the spot where you didn't get your ten yards. This is called "field position," as in having good field position (near the other team's goal) or bad field position (near your own).

The other thing you can do on fourth down, if you have good field position, is kick a field goal. If you've gotten close to the other team's goal, but not actually into it, you have your kicker try to kick the ball through the goalposts (the uprights, we call the arms on either side), and you get three points if he makes it.

Once you get your ten yards, you get a whole new set of downs. This keeps up until you punt, or get a field goal, or score a touchdown by getting into the other team's goal. Or—this is where I come in—until one of your players loses the ball and the other team gets it. It has to be a "live" ball, which is complicated and there are lots of rules around it but essentially it means that the play isn't over yet. So if your running back

drops the ball and I pick it up, or your quarterback is a crappy passer and I get the pass before his receiver does, then that's a "change of possession" and the ball belongs to us. We can run it back as far as we can on that play, then our offense takes over on the next one.

That's why I love playing defense. We get to be in on the big plays, the game-changing ones that "turn the tide," "shift the momentum," whatever you want to call it. There's nothing like the feeling you get when you get your paws on the ball as a defender. Nothing.

Not to say there's nothing better. Just nothing like it.

Brian's Song and Dance (Lee)

December 2006

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

"Hey, Wiley, it's Brian. Again."

The pause before the "again" is perfectly timed. If he'd let it be part of the sentence, it might've slipped by me. The hesitation is not because he's wondering whether to bring it up. It's so that he can make me aware that he knows I've been avoiding his calls.

"I got your message about next weekend. Sorry you'll be out of town."

Delivered with just the right amount of sarcasm. I don't doubt that he's sorry. I know he doubts that I'm really out of town. Fortunately for me, I will be; I wouldn't put it past him to turn up unexpectedly at my door, to catch me out. One reason we would never have made it as a couple: we think too much alike.

"Why don't you give me a call sometime Sunday evening, between seven and nine? I'll arrange my next visit around your schedule."

I knew I'd only be able to get away with calling when I knew he was out a few times. And I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid him forever.

"Hope to talk to you soon."

Oh, he's good. Such a simple phrase, layered expertly with expectations, sadness, and a touch of annoyance. Just enough to make me feel guilty.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

Brian is a great actor for just that reason. He rarely lets anything slip out without a direction and a target, and he hits the mark more often than not. He got me into acting, but I'll never be as good as he is.

Of course, that's also indirectly why he's no longer attending Forester.

We hit it off the first day we met, October of my freshman year: two gay boys from Midwestern towns, sitting in the Forester Lesbians And Gays orientation, both sitting there with tails wagging, thinking that this is why we came to Forester University. There were other freshmen there too, but when the spotted skunk stood up and said, "I've been waiting my whole life to be here," which was almost word for word what I'd planned to say, I grinned so wide that he gave me a quick wink as he sat down.

After the meeting, we all went out for drinks. Brian and I closed the

bar down, then went back to his dorm room and talked until four in the morning. We didn't sleep together or even fool around, then or ever. He said it was because we were too much alike, but the truth is more prosaic. That first night, we were both hyperconscious of the "safe sex" talk we'd gotten at the orientation. Soon after that, he hooked up with Tad, and by the time they broke up (a memorable scene worth a story in itself), I was dating Micha. After that, we were too comfortable with our friendship to want to sleep together.

Not that we didn't have some partners in common. He dated Micha after I did, and we both slept with this ringtail named Allen, who joined FLAG our sophomore year. Comparing partners was always good for hours of talk, tossing back a couple beers in between bitchy and sometimes wistful commentary ("such a shame... that thick head on that cute ass"). But Brian and I never lacked for things to talk about. He was a theater arts major and I was English, so he got me to join the Forester Troupe and I got him to read Wilde. We both loved sports, and though I liked the mechanics of football and the tactics while he liked to follow players and keep statistics, we both liked watching the guys' butts onscreen. Brian used to say it was the gayest thing you could do while acting straight.

Monday nights are the FLAG meetings, and I've been avoiding those too. But to assuage some of the guilt from Brian's call, I head down there tonight.

Going to a FLAG meeting isn't as easy as just showing up at the Richman F. Baker Center at 8 pm. No, there's a whole ritual around it. Dinner at the Class of 1939 Pavilion, first, where my arrival at the table is greeted with mock amazement designed to hide the real thing.

"Wiley Farrel, as I live and breathe!"

"Hey, look, fellas, this newbie's a real fox!"

"Oh, Mister Farrel, how nice of you to step down off the stage and mingle with us common rabble."

"Slumming it tonight, Lee?"

The fake Southern accent belongs to Allen, the ringtail who does sets for the theater troupe, and whom I've mentioned once already. The punster is Liz, a badger who wears denim overalls everywhere. They're both juniors. Daniel is the sole sophomore, a twinkie raccoon who obsesses about his weight. Jake, the cougar who's his current fling, is a senior like me, though he didn't join FLAG until our sophomore year. Came out to his parents over the summer and they kicked him out. Last year they took him

back in.

And the lanky weasel who doesn't say anything, just slides his chair over and smiles at me, that's Salim, my best friend now. I didn't tell him I'd be coming tonight, but I knew he wouldn't be surprised. He asked me why I stopped going. When I didn't tell him, he just shrugged and said, "You'll come back when you're ready to come back." And he never asked again.

"Hello, ladies," I say with a flourish. "Sorry: ladies and Liz. Yes, I felt it was time. You all have suffered without my classical charm and good looks for long enough."

Liz snorts, and as a badger, she does that exceptionally well. Daniel flutters his eyes and says, "Oh, Mister Fox!" and feigns a swoon.

Salim gives me a soft smile and says, "Don't eat the green beans, they've been there for ages."

"I got a fresh batch," I say, digging into the chicken a la king.

"So to what do we owe the honor, Lee?" Jake says, his black-tufted ears flicking in my direction.

"'Square Room' is all done," I say around mouthfuls of cream and chicken. "And we finished the draft of 'Monkey Wrench, ' so no more writing meetings."

"Did you write yourself a big fat part for that one, Red Flag?" Liz thinks that nickname is cute, because (she says) I like to draw attention to myself. Plus she thinks the "FLAG" tie-in is a bonus. Liz thinks a lot of weird things.

I give her a courtesy flick of the ears and then return their focus to the table at large. "No, I've done enough acting for a while," I say. "But if you want a part, we have 'Screaming Baby' still uncast."

"Did you guys work out your issues with the writing?" Salim says, and for a few minutes we divert the conversation into the faults and strengths of Jeffrey Purgudeon, my co-writer on the play.

Allen, predictably, is the one who brings it back around to me. "So, you sleeping with him?"

"Jeffrey?" I snort. "His knowledge of sex is purely theoretical, and he's so straight you could calibrate a ruler to him. He's utterly bemused by the concept of any non-traditional relationship. I wrote a gay couple into the script and I think he still thinks they're 'just good friends.'" I pause for effect. "The kiss did give him a little pause."

The ringtail leans his elbows on the table while I take another few bites. He waits until I look up to see his stare and accompanying smirk. "Well then, who is your new 'good friend'?"

I take a long time to chew my food. "Why?" I say. "Tired of hitting on all these guys and anxious to meet someone new?"

Allen arches an eyebrow. "Well, if he's up to the famous Lee standard, then he must be something to see. And we're all curious to see who could've held your attention for more than a month."

I grin back. "See, even if I were dating someone, why would I bring them into the house of a thousand daggers here?" I'm playing a double game, here, not confirming the existence of my friend and not mentioning a gender intentionally.

"Only five hundred daggers when you're not around." Jake claps me on the shoulder.

"And when you keep yours sheathed," I say. "Really, I'm gonna try to make it to more meetings from now on."

"Cool," Daniel says, and pushes his plate away.

"Oh, come on," Liz says, pushing it back. "You better finish that or I'll have Jake hold you while I force it down your throat."

"I dunno," Allen says, "He's looking a little chubby around the cheeks."

"Allen!" Jake says.

"Fat city," I chime in, and Jake mock-threatens me as Liz glares at Allen, Daniel looks worried, and Salim chuckles. "Don't listen to them," Liz says, "just eat."

The raccoon looks doubtful, but takes a few more bites. We watch until he scowls at us.

"Hey," Allen says after a minute, "you know, Brian's gonna be in town next weekend. We're having a little party over at our place. You should come, Lee."

"Can't," I say. "I'm going out of town." I'm sure Brian told him that, and his attempt at a guileless smile confirms it. "Oh? Where to?"

"I'm going up to Giancolo to frolic in the snow," I say blandly.

"Well, you can still come, Salim," Allen says.

Salim nods his head towards me. "I'm giving the fox a ride."

"Oh, is that how it is?"

"Not *that* kind of ride," I say.

The humor falls rather flat. Allen looks back at me, and I can see the thoughts in his head: he'll tell Salim, but not me. I feel pretty confident that he can't get to the truth from where he is. Nor can Jake or Liz, who are both looking a little puzzled. But they give up quickly. Allen keeps staring at me, turning my words over in his head, searching for that one clue that

will unlock the vulpine mystery.

Daniel looks up from his plate at the silence, his black mask turning back and forth. "What?"

"Ah, nothing," Allen says. He leans back in his chair. "Same old same old, eh, Lee?"

I flick my ears. "Why change now?" I give him my best foxy grin, and he grins back.

"Swear to God," Jake says, "I don't know how you two stayed in the same room without ripping out each other's fur."

"That only happened the one time," I say, and Allen giggles, breaking the tension. I finish up my dinner and we head off to the meeting.

The FLAG meeting is being run by some business school polar bear named Keith, whose immaculate fur and diction are what we seniors snicker about in the back of the room. Allen joins us, making remarks about how glad he is that he didn't run for president. Back when Jake was running it, it had a friendlier vibe, and the meetings had a social component. Now it's all business, with no room for our comradely ribbing.

Our little group goes out to Kitteridge's for coffee afterwards, as usual. We sit around until nearly midnight catching up on gossip. The subject of where I've been doesn't come up. It's like I'm part of the group again, sitting around, shooting the breeze over lattes, looking at the postcards covering the walls. Fleetinglly, I wonder if Brian might have sent one.

"That was nice," I say to Salim as we walk home.

He smiles and shrugs. "It is what it is."

"Maybe I shouldn't have avoided the meetings for so long."

"You seemed to be doing okay."

"I just never started again after the summer. It was easy not to miss it, with Dev and all."

Salim bumps me as we walk. "I am going to get to meet him, right?"

"Yeah." I don't bother hiding my nervousness, but it has more to do with how he'll react to Salim than the other way around. Salim already knows what to expect, and he's so even-tempered, I can't imagine anything ruffling him. When I told him what was going on, his tail twitched, he leaned back for a moment, and then said, "Well, I can see why you've been having problems. I assume you haven't told Brian." And that was the whole of his reaction.

I told Brian things I never told anyone else. I hid things from him, sure, but they were little things, like what Tad said about him the week

before they broke up. I told him almost everything, but a few hurtful things I kept to myself. Other than that, there weren't many secrets between us.

The whole FLAG dinner group was light on secrets. When Allen and I slept together, three weeks after he slept with Brian, the phrase "another ring on his tail" was coined. When Jake failed his Econ midterm and didn't know whether he'd graduate, we all offered plans of action (Brian and I recommended an Econ tutor who ended up helping him pass). And when the thing with Brian happened, before it made the papers, our group knew all about it. We didn't get home from coffee 'til 3 am that night, and none of us slept when we did, jittery from caffeine and anger.

Brian and I were the backbone of the FLAG dinners. Salim and Daniel joined our junior year, replacing the guys who'd graduated. When they did, Brian and I were the ones who issued the invitations, not because it was ever formally decided that we would, but because the others deferred to us. We knew they'd fit in, and they did. I was especially glad to have Salim there, later on.

They didn't actually get to see very much of Brian. And once he was gone, the group was just too different, at least for me. But I'd told myself that for so long, tried to convince myself that that was the reason I stopped going, that I'd forgotten how much of it was the same.

We're five songs into the first CD when the subject of Brian comes up. Salim's been driving steadily and reliably; every time I glance at the speedometer it reads 73 mph, an amazing feat considering he doesn't have cruise control. It's only a three hour drive, but I've been fidgeting the whole time: rearranging my tail against the seat, shifting my weight, curling one leg under me, sitting properly again, looking out the window, looking at Salim, looking at my own paws in my lap. All this while Salim is talking about classes, about the scenery, about hoping the weather will hold—it's one of those clear winter days where you can see the puffs of white as the car exhausts give up what little moisture they contain to the cold air.

December hits Forester gently; usually the big storms don't come in until late January, early February. Still, car trips are an iffy business between Thanksgiving and St. Patrick's, and I didn't have the money to rent a car or fly to Chikewa Falls, so having a best friend with a working car was the only way I was going to get to the game. I was paying for the gas, and my... boyfriend... had paid for the lodging.

It still feels weird to call him that. I've had boyfriends before, plenty of them. It's a casual term, loosely slung about when you stop looking at other

guys for a few weeks. You wear it proudly to your straight friends because it's a validation of your lifestyle: I am gay and I have a committed partner. So there, myth of promiscuity! You wear it proudly to your gay friends in the way that women show off engagement rings: look, I got someone to commit to me! And the silly truth is that there's a world of difference between the boyfriends I had before now, and the boyfriend I have now.

We use the term whenever we get a sniff of commitment, but like love itself, whenever you think you've arrived at the pinnacle, you find that there's something beyond that. In high school, when I had my first sexual experience, I thought we were boyfriends the next morning. Sophomore year, when Micha called me his boyfriend, I looked back on high school and laughed at how naive I'd been. Now, I look back at that and laugh, but more quietly, because I'm starting to wonder what I'll be feeling when I look back at myself in a few more years, and whether I'll be laughing then at my ignorance now. Because Micha was and is a sweet, sweet arctic fox. But I never would have driven three hours to see one of his debate matches.

"I heard from Brian last night," Salim says unexpectedly as the fifth song on the album is winding to a close in a screech of guitars. His car, he gets to pick the music.

"Huh." I make a noncommittal noise and look out the window at the skeletons of trees rushing by.

"He was asking about you, asking if you were avoiding him."

"He knows I am." I kept looking out the window.

"He doesn't know why."

"If he did," I said, "I wouldn't have to avoid him."

"You should just tell him, Lee," he says. "He'll understand."

"He'll kill me."

"Maybe," he concedes, "but afterwards, he'll understand. I mean, it's not like you're dating one of the guys who actually did that terrible thing."

"It's not just that." I sigh. "I'm worried that he'll do something..."

"Rash?" Salim cocks his head. "You never mentioned this before."

"I didn't want to talk about it much. I just feel guilty as hell about it, and I feel like this is pushing the blame back on him. At the same time... you didn't really get to know Brian. He was impulsive at times."

"So what are you worried about?"

It sounds silly and petty, saying it out loud. "We used to talk about gays in sports, and how it would just take one popular athlete coming out to start a waterfall. He'd be so thrilled to find out one of our star players is

gay."

"He might call the paper." I nod. "Okay," Salim says. "I know my memory is not always perfect, but Lee, is that not what you had intended to do from the start?"

"No. I just wanted to get one of them in bed, show them that they could be a little bit gay. Give them that thought next time they said 'faggot', that 'hey, that's me too'. Make 'em stop and think, hard as that is for them."

"Despite the fact that most studies show that the more a homophobe suspects he's gay, the more homophobic he tends to be?"

I glance at the weasel's profile. His eyes are fixed on the road, but his ears are fixed on me. "Okay, so maybe some of it was wanting to have that to hold over them, too. In case something else happened."

"You could threaten to go to the paper." "Yeah," I say, reluctantly.

"So partly you worry that Brian will do this because it is what you yourself might do."

"Well, yeah. Brian and I always used to think alike."

The 'used to' hangs in the air until Salim dispels it. "Why do you not want to go to the papers? Afraid he'd hate you?"

"Partly," I admit. "But I think more... he's really good. I mean, I knew he could be good, but he's just on a whole other level this year. He could go pro, Salim. There was a scout from the Dragons at the last game."

"For him?"

"Could be him, could be our left guard. He's no slouch either."

The weasel chuckles. "I don't know how you know these things."

"I've been watching football for a long time." I grin at him.

"I have been to three games with you and I still do not see the things you see. I see players running into each other like bumper cars."

"It takes practice, I keep telling you. And you have to look up from their butts once in a while."

He sighs. "Then why do they dress them so tightly?"

Brian and I used to argue over which player on our team had the best ass. We would do it in the stands, which was fine because we'd never say out loud what we were looking at, just "hey, number 61." "Oh, yeah, but look at 37." "I still like 61." Anyone with half a brain could figure it out, but at a football game that still excludes half the audience, even at a liberal arts school like Forester. It was daring and it made us feel dangerous without putting ourselves in real danger.

For pro football, I liked to watch in our suite in the dorms, where we

were pretty much out to the whole floor, so we were expected to make comments like "holy cow, I'd like to have him under my tail" and so on. We sat between the girls and the guys and had a blast. Even when I moved off campus for monetary reasons, I went back to the dorm every Sunday afternoon during football season.

Being out and open around football grew intertwined with our identities, me and Brian. I know that when I watched it alone, over Thanksgiving at home with my father, or over the winter break, it was different, not as much fun somehow. Not that I wasn't out to my parents, but I wasn't about to go lusting after athletes in front of them either. And when I was home, I wasn't Wiley Farrel: gay fox, I was Wiley, son of Brenly and Eileen Farrel, who once stumbled downstairs naked at the age of seven and announced to a dinner party that my clothes were trying to strangle me. Watching football at home was a family thing; but football itself had become for me something different, and I couldn't go back to the way it used to be. And now, it was something different still.

Salim might not understand football, but he loves concession food. While I scour the sidelines for pro scouts, and make my usual pre-game eye contact with my boyfriend (*My boyfriend. My boyfriend.*), he finds the hot dog stand and returns with four dogs and a pair of drinks. I eye the food dubiously. "How many of those are for me?"

He gives me a cheerful grin. "As many as you want." He hands me one of the drinks. "Plus this sparkling water."

"Sparkling water?" I taste it; it's hypersweet.

"Okay, they did not have sparkling water." He hands me one dog with mustard, and I take it with a grin.

"This is Dijon mustard, right?" I say, licking up one of the bright yellow gobs.

"Absolutely, my friend," Salim says. "And one hundred percent pure chicken dogs."

I make a show of sniffing the dog before biting into it. "Ah, haute cuisine."

Salim's already halfway through his dog, yellow smears all over his brown and white fur. "I love it," he says. "Any scouts here?"

I point down to the sidelines. "There's the guy from the Dragons again. In the green jacket, see? And I think there's a guy from the Orcas on the other sideline. He's got a clipboard and a camera and he's wearing their colors, blue and white."

"Where do the Orcas play?" he says around a mouthful of hot dog.

"Millenport," I say, fiddling with the binoculars. "Yeah... there's their logo on his shirt."

"Are they any good?"

"No."

The game starts with some fanfare; it's the second round of the Division II playoffs, after all. Forester is in the playoffs for the first time in five years. Their reward for winning their first game, their first playoff win in twenty-one years, is to play the Chikewa State Firedogs.

"Are the Firedogs any good?" Salim asks.

"Number one in the polls," I tell him, watching the players as they line up. "Their QB is insane. See him there, number 14, the white wolf chatting up the cheerleader?"

"Insane is good?" Salim takes the binocs. "Nice," he murmurs, "Bleached, though. You can see the roots in his tail."

"Nothing fake about his arm," I say. "Wait 'til you see him throw." I haven't, personally, and I'm kind of excited about it on a couple levels. I love great displays of athleticism, and everything I've read says Seito's the best in D-II, and he could probably start in D-I. He wasn't recruited because he wasn't anything great in high school, but he's come along really well, and the scouts are likely here to see him, not my tiger.

That's okay. The other thing I'm excited about is watching my tiger defend against the wolf's passes. Because it doesn't matter who the scouts came to see. They won't miss a great performance.

"Are you cold?" Salim asks me as they line up to kick off.

"No."

"Your paws are shaking. And you're rocking back and forth."

I clench my paws together. "I just want him to do well."

Even though I'm staring at the field, I can feel his eyes on me. They make my whiskers twitch. "I have never seen you this nervous."

"It's a big game," I say, "and you didn't come to last week's."

He chuckles, and pats my arm. "He's going to do fine. Look, they won the coin toss. That's good, right? And here comes your tiger."

"Yeah." The Firedogs offense comes out too. They line up across from each other. Here we go.

I should've known better than to worry about Dev. He knows his routes and assignments now, and he sticks to them perfectly, even when it's clear they have no intention of throwing to his side of the field. The white wolf shows his arm on the second play, dropping back and then heaving a

perfect pass that drops to the ground on the ten yard line only because his receiver lets the ball go through his paws.

"Wow," I breathe, and Salim looks at me.

"That was good, huh?"

I nod. "We're in trouble."

But by halftime, Chikewa Falls is only up 10-7. Dev gets near the ball four times; once he swats it out of the air, twice he makes a great tackle, and once he bobbles a possible interception and drops it. The Firedogs get their only points on the ground; Forester gets theirs the same way on the other side.

Late in the third quarter, Dev is playing back as the Firedogs' two wideouts speed up either side of the field. The faster one, a jackal, is on Dev's side of the field, while the jaguar on the other side has been getting most of the passes. They've run this play a couple times and always gone to the jaguar, but this time the jackal looks more focused. "Don't be fooled, Dev," I mutter under my breath. Again, no need to worry. He glances toward the jaguar and fakes a step in that direction; just as the white wolf cocks his arm to throw, my tiger spins and heads for the jackal. They meet at the ball, and while the jackal is faster, Dev is taller. He reaches up with one huge paw and swipes the ball out of the air, skimming the jackal's outstretched paws, and this time Dev hangs on, stumbling and then regaining his feet, dodging the Firedogs who have suddenly been turned into defenders, getting back to the fifty before the jackal tackles him and takes him down.

I'm on my feet with the rest of the Forester students screaming and cheering, and I see him look up at me as he struts off the field into a swarm of hugging and high-fives. Three plays later, our QB dodges and jumps, staying alive as the diagrammed play degenerates into a free-for-all downfield, and finds our lumbering tight end, of all people, alone on the five. He hits the badger with a perfect strike and Kiley trots in for the score. 14-10 Forester.

"Holy shit," I say to Salim. "We might be going to the semis." He blinks. "This is good, right?"

Both defenses play inspired ball through the middle of the fourth. The white wolf tries two more deep passes, completing one to the jaguar while Dev breaks up the other, but they can't get more than a field goal out of it. 14-13 Forester. We can't do anything against them and they get the ball back with five minutes to go.

The white wolf tries another pass to the jackal. It's perfectly placed,

dropped right into his outstretched paws. Nothing Dev can do but tackle him, but he does that well. They run the clock down with some running plays, and normally I wouldn't be worried about a field goal because D-II kickers almost universally suck, but theirs has made two already today. I see him practicing on the sidelines, a rabbit with a decent leg, and when they get to the twenty, I slump back in my seat.

Salim looks at the scoreboard and then at me. "If they kick it, they win," he says.

"Yup."

The rabbit comes out with twelve seconds on the clock. Dev is lined up to help block, but Chikewa has a good unit. They snap, it's a perfect hold, and the rabbit puts it through. 16-14 Chikewa. Eight seconds left.

Our only hope is with our QB, but Darron doesn't have the arm strength to make it all the way downfield. I think the coaches told the return guys to get as much yardage as they could, because when they catch the ball on the fifteen, instead of downing it right away, they take off. It's a red fox carrying the ball, one of our receivers, and he's got enough moves to make it to the fifty. Unfortunately, he breaks for the sidelines too late, and they slow him down just enough. Time's up. Game's over.

I see Dev's shoulders slump and I want to run down there right away, hug him, tell him everything's going to be okay. Instead, I grab Salim's paw. "Come on."

He squeaks as I drag him to the aisle and down, against the flow of dispirited Forester students. "Where are we going? Ow! You crazy fox, slow down!"

"Hush," I say. "Just play along." I watch the teams on the field shaking paws and am glad to see Dev meet Seito and hug him. The two exchange some words, and I see the wolf shaking his head, and the two of them laughing.

We get down near the field and I angle to my left. The crowd's thinned out now, so I can see the Dragons scout, a tall, hefty cougar in a green jacket scribbling some notes on his clipboard. When we're within a few feet of him, I start talking to Salim very loudly about the Forester defense, things like "we'd never have gotten that far without Miski" and explaining a couple of the better plays I'd seen him run. Salim didn't have to do much to play along, just ask some questions, but he's pretty good at that.

The scout's ears flick back as I start describing one of the other plays, and say to Salim, "Not many people would notice his work on that one."

"I saw that play." The scout says. He turns to look at me. "You a

friend of his?"

"Yeah." I grin. "But he's still a good player."

The scout nods, still studying me. "What did you think about Chikewa going away from the cover 2 late in the game?"

"They knew our QB couldn't beat 'em. They've got some good DBs and our wideouts are only average. Our strength is our running game."

"Who's the second-best player on your team?"

"Our left guard," I say promptly. "That's why we run all our plays to his side. He opens holes for the running game and gives us time to get off a good pass. He had a pretty good game too."

"Yeah, he did." The scout hesitates for a moment, then reaches into his pocket and hands me a card. "Morty DeWitt. I'm with the Dragons."

I take the card and grin. "I know. I've seen you at Forester's last couple games. I was hoping you were watching Dev."

"We are," he says, "not that that means anything."

"I know." I give him a nice smile. "Just glad to see he's generating some interest."

He squints and tosses his clipboard into his bag. "You don't happen to know what lit a fire under his tail, do you?"

Salim coughs into his paw. I look angelic as I say, "I think he finally saw his potential and decided to live up to it."

He nods and hefts his bag. "Good for him. I see lots of kids who never get that far. I need to work out the final numbers, but chances are good we'll see him at some of the combines. And you've got a pretty good eye, too." He indicates the card, which I'm still holding. "If Miski gets invited to the combine, you come along too. Give me a ring and I'll take you out for a drink."

I flash the card back at him and tuck it into my pocket. "Thanks," I say. "I will."

Brian wanted to go to Hollywood after college—after an appropriate internship on Broadway, of course, learning theater the classical way. As an English major, I was aware that my career choices were equally limited. I ran through the usual gamut of options: take up a business minor and write ad copy until my novel was published, work a shitty retail job until my novel was published, or live in my parents' basement until my novel was published. I never doubted that I would write a novel, and all through my sophomore year I studied the techniques of novel writers diligendy.

Junior year I moved into playwriting with the theater group, and

suddenly I had a whole new vista to explore. I'd always liked to write dialogue best, and here was a medium that was all dialogue—perfect for me. Brian encouraged me, and I wrote parts for him in my plays. There was even a part for him in "Square Room," but he never got to play it.

It was funny how, of all the things that changed our lives, we never suspected that football might be the most significant.

It's right after Salim tells me to stop fidgeting for the third time that Dev walks into the restaurant.

I say "restaurant" even though it's just the small cafe associated with the hotel, and I say "walk" even though Dev is slouching, his head down, tail dragging on the ground. I know how he feels, but I can't stop my tail from wagging when I see him, and as he meets my eyes, I hope to see similar excitement.

Instead, he just looks back down as he approaches our table, pulling his chair out and slumping down in it. He avoids my gaze like a kid who's done something wrong.

"Dev," I say, "this is Salim. I've talked to you about him a bit."

"Hey," Salim says.

"Hi," Dev says. "Sorry for letting you down."

He says it to a spot on the table between me and Salim, but it's definitely meant for me. "You played an amazing game," I tell him. "You couldn't have done any better. You can't score points for our offense."

He shrugs, fiddling with his silverware. I regret inviting Salim to dinner, now, cursing because I hadn't anticipated this. Dev has had such a great run this season that I forgot, until now, how he would react to a loss. And this one stings much more because it was the playoffs, and because he thinks he's let me down.

That just makes me determined to fix it. I lean across the table to Dev and gently lift his chin. "Hey, if you're going to pout," I say, "go back to the room."

His head jerks up. He looks angry at first, then stubborn. "Fine," he says, but he doesn't move.

"You do remember how the game of football is played, right? You are aware that what you do happens when you're on the field?"

He glances at Salim, who's looking nonplused. "I know how to play..."

"I mean, unless Darron was looking to the bench for you to call in his decisions. In which case, yeah, I'd say you let us down, because that pass he threw into coverage was pure crap and he should know better."

"I could've saved that one long play."

"No, you couldn't." That sets him back. "You're good, but you're not Red Lightning. They ran a perfect out and Seito dropped the ball exactly where it needed to be. You couldn't have prevented it, so stop acting like an ass and enjoy dinner."

"Oh, very nice," he said. "You don't have any idea what it's like out there."

"I know what I saw and what I saw was a perfect pass against which you did the best you could. You altered the game significantly and you did a great job and you're pissing me off by acting all sad about it."

"Aren't you upset that we're going home?"

He's acting more perky now, and I could probably stop, but I'm kind of getting into the argument. "Sure, but we took number one down to the final minute. I mean, a couple breaks and we win that thing. And they're better than we are, believe me. I was watching."

That makes him bristle. "Oh," he says coldly.

"You know, everything's not about you," I say. "They don't have anyone who can match up with you, and you know it. There, I said it out loud."

We stare at each other for a second, until Salim makes a noise and Dev and I look over at him. "Sorry," Dev says, and glances at me with a smirk. "Sometimes the fox and I get into it."

Salim looks uncertainly between us. "Should I leave?" he asks me.

I shake my head and grin. "Don't worry about it. How's the Cosmo?"

"It's okay," Salim says, and then turns to Dev. "Hey, I thought you played very well."

Dev looks at him and says "thanks" in a clearly offhanded way.

"No, really," Salim says. "Wiley explained it all to me and I could see what he was saying."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Dev says, and slides me one of those looks that snaps taut the cord between my heart and my sheath, and I thank goodness they're talking because for a moment I wouldn't be able to speak. I thank goodness twice that Dev doesn't know what he can do to me with that look.

The dinner goes on pretty well after that. Salim relaxes visibly once we stop arguing, and we all enjoy the wine he orders. We talk about the renovations on campus, the news of the world, the world of science, and Salim and Dev find out that they both took the same basic Biology class two years ago. Salim's a chemistry major and took it his freshman year; Dev took it as a sophomore. They exchange stories of the class while I sip

wine and tease Dev's paws under the table.

After dinner, Salim grins at the both of us shyly and says, "So, I was thinking about taking a walk for a couple hours. There's a movie playing in the campus theater I want to see."

"Oh? What movie?" Dev asks before I nudge him sharply.

Salim just smiles and shrugs. "I don't remember the name," he says, and Dev, understanding, looks embarrassed.

"Oh, well, enjoy it," he says. "I'll probably be gone when you get back. Got to get back to the team hotel. The bus leaves at like seven in the morning."

They shake paws, and Salim says, "Very glad to have met you."

"Nice of him to leave us alone," Dev says when he's gone.

"Nice nothing," I say. "He wanted to stay and watch."

It's probably a mistake, because Dev still has all these preconceptions about gay guys and what they're into. His eyes go wide, then narrow, and I head him off, laughing. "Joke, stud."

He growls, and says, "All right, are we done?"

He means the table. I nod, so he tosses some money on the check. I say, "Let's go."

We're barely inside the door of the hotel room before he shoves me against it and presses his muzzle to mine. I squirm and wrap my paws around him, panting into a deep kiss.

He thrusts his tongue against mine and growls deep in the back of his throat. Dev isn't a gentle lover by any means, even when he thinks he's being soft. His tongue and paws press into me with determined resolve, always making me feel like he's fighting a battle inside and forcing himself to touch me. I know better, of course, by this point. He plays football the same way, with quick, forceful movements; that's just how he is. In football, it's an asset. In romance, it takes a little getting used to.

I'm always the first one with my paws in his pants. I see him only once a week, and by the time our Saturday rendezvous rolls around, I'm hungry for him. Besides, it's always seemed necessary to get him going. Now, tonight, when I get a paw past his pants, he's already rock hard and it's clear that he got himself going without my help.

I give him some assistance anyway, rubbing my paw against him as we kiss and getting a deeper growl in return. I love that growl. It reaches into some primal place in my brain and scares the crap out of me. Consciously, I know he'll never hurt me, and it's just a demonstration of his power, but I still get that little buzz of excitement. He's my own private

roller coaster, a visceral thrill ride on so many levels, and I never get tired of him.

He slides his paws under my shirt, lifts it off, and I moan back into his muzzle, sucking my stomach in for his appreciation. We haven't broken the kiss, and that's nothing new. Our kisses could set world records, and when we break them, I see my hunger for more mirrored in his tawny eyes. For now, our muzzles remain locked, and our paws slide all over each other.

It isn't until we break the kiss and start to move to the bed that I get the feeling, and I stop and grin at him.

"What?" he says, clearly impatient but interested, because I don't usually stop in the middle of things.

"This feels different," I say, gesturing around at the room. "First time we've done it outside my apartment."

"Yeah?" He looks around the room. "And you're not wearing a dress."

I cock my head. "Does that bother you?"

By way of answer, he reaches out and undoes my pants, sending them to the floor. "Does it look like it bothers me, doc?"

I start to answer, but he's got his paw on my cock and is rubbing, and my thoughts about how our relationship has progressed don't seem nearly as important anymore, so I push him over to the bed without saying another word.

He's still not much for the oral, though he's tried it a couple times, but when I see him lying back on the bed, that nicely shaped bulge pushing up against his boxers, that's all I can think about. I slide them down and slip my black fingers behind his gorgeous pink cock, lifting it away from his stomach and watching his expression as I do.

His eyes are half-lidded and one paw is tensed over the sheets, anticipating what I'm going to do. I like to draw the anticipation out now that he knows me well enough to know what's coming next, so as much as I want to just take his whole length into my muzzle, I start out just breathing on it.

His fingers twitch. I breathe again, letting my fingers stroke very lightly around the base where I'm holding it, pulling the sheath down his length. He makes a low sound of pleasure that's not a growl or a purr, but somewhere in between, and he makes it again when I lightly trail the tip of my tongue up his tip. I can taste him, rich and musky, and I can't stop myself from pressing my tongue harder against him to get more of the taste.

I hear the rasp of his claws extending into the sheets. Oh, well. Might

as well keep going now that I've started it. I lick again, cleaning him off, and then slide his tip into my muzzle.

He shudders a bit and I moan too, just loving the feel of him against my tongue and the roof of my muzzle. Sliding up and down, I lose myself in the feelings, letting my paw caress his sheath and sac, the soft white forms that feel so good paired with the hardness sliding through my lips.

But it's not all physical. As I'm going down on him, I'm remembering the grace and power in his body down on the field. I'm listening to the sounds of pleasure he makes and getting a little thrill that I'm the one drawing those noises out of him. Knowing who he is and who I am, it's special in a way that it wasn't with any of my other boyfriends. This big, powerful football player is lying back on my bed—well, my borrowed bed, in this case—pretty much at my mercy.

As I roll his length around my muzzle, pressing my tongue against it, I use my spare paws to pull his boxers down further in the course of caressing him. He's lifted his own shirt off while I've been sucking him, without me noticing, so I let my paws roam around his finely muscled hips and up to his belly, which he tightens for me. Once I have his boxers down to his knees, I slide my own down. My erection isn't as impressive as his, but it's just as hard now, and when I let him slide out of my muzzle and move up to straddle him, he wraps his paw around it and smiles just as nice as you please.

I've brought some lube with me, stashed in the drawer with the Bible. While he paws me, I reach over him and bring it out, making sure he sees it as I flip it open with a practiced paw. He watches me with the hint of a smile, holding his breath, his paws clenching the sheets. I can feel the desire; it comes off him in waves, like a scent that fills my nose and sinks in through my fur. I squirt too much lube out and don't care.

I'm panting, as impatient as he is as I smear the lube under my tail and stick my fingers inside myself. It teases him when I just sit there and play with myself, but it teases me, too, kneeling astride his hips, feeling the heat from his cock on the underside of mine as my fingers slide up and down, a prelude to the main event. I reach down and squeeze our two lengths together, pumping gently. His breath gets raspy. My tongue lolls out.

I'm ready, more than ready. The prelude is over; my paw slips out and comes around to stroke his cock and slicken it all up. I savor again the gorgeous hardness and maleness of him, my paw rubbing up and down until he squirms and lifts his legs, pushing me forward. I grin, rubbing my slick rear over his shaft, and then in a quick motion, pull him up and push

my hips back.

He's big. I was sore for two days the first time I took him. Since then, well... I've had practice.

He slides in all the way like he belongs there, and both of us close our eyes. I love to watch his eyes roll back as I slide back and forth on him, so I open my eyes first. My hips press back until my rear wriggles against his fur. I hold there and then start moving forward and back.

There go his eyes, and his paws come up to my hips, holding me as I ride his shaft. I like to try to come at the same time he does, but mostly I just want to make sure he comes first. Then I can get myself off pretty quickly. Hell, with his huge cock thrusting in and out of me, it's all I can do to keep from spurting all over his chest.

Every nerve in my body is tingling. Below me, the gorgeous tiger is moaning, panting hard, his hips starting to slam up into me. I think he's past the point of knowing what he's doing. His paws are painfully tight on my legs, thumbs digging into my hips. I can feel the strength and power in him, and still I'm directing the action, just a little fox riding the tiger.

And when he comes, it's beautiful. His legs draw up behind me and he chokes out a moaning roar, slamming his hips hard into me, and every muscle in his body is taut and thrumming so hard that I feel I'm a part of it. I'm already stroking myself quickly, and a moment later I am part of it, my muscles hard against his, shaking in tune with him as my climax builds from his.

My favorite moments with him are these. He's panting, looking up at me and smiling. I can still feel his hard warmth inside me and I can smell our climaxes in the air. It's the one time when I know exactly what he's feeling, because I'm feeling it too. I lean over, ignoring my sticky mess in his fur, and kiss him on the lips, gently, our driving need now sated.

His paws travel up and down my side, claws half-extended and making tracks through my fur, making my sensitive skin shiver in response. I look around and once again get the feeling that by taking our relationship out of my apartment, we've matured it, made it more real.

I open my muzzle to say something, and he squeezes my sides. "Let's finish getting the clothes off, doc," he says, edging his boxers all the way off. "Think the shower's big enough for two?"

I do, and it is.

It's a stereotype to say that gay people mostly just talk about sex. Certainly Brian and I talked about a lot of other things, as I've said, but

honestly, sex came up a lot. In the small amount of gay studies I've done (and how dry does that make it sound?), I know that you can say that gay people focus on sex because that's what makes them different, that's what defines them as a group. But I've been around groups of straight guys, and they talk about sex a lot, too. It's more a guy thing than a gay thing.

Brian and I went one better than technique and size. We were all into the philosophy of sex. As confirmed non-interested partners, we were free to talk about what it meant without either one worrying that we were talking about something the other had done. And boy, did we. Sometimes 'til 3 am in our dorm lounge, the box of donut holes long since empty, coffee cups cold and dry.

Brian was an actor, as I've said, and his philosophy could be distilled down to its core as "people are always acting." Even during sex, he maintained, he was always thinking about how he should act, what pitch of moan would give the best effect, when would be the dramatic moment to finish. I didn't believe he had that level of control, but he assured me he did. I asked Allen about it once. He said, "I don't know, but every time we finished, I wanted to applaud."

So Brian believed that everyone acted that way, or aspired to. He had an actor's appreciation for love; that is to say, he knew exactly how someone in love acted. I don't think he ever felt love himself, which is not a condemnation; at the time of our discussions, neither had I. The difference was that I thought I had, and he knew he hadn't.

See, I was a romantic. Still am. I love reading any book that has a sniff of romance in it, from the old Shakespeare plays to trashy modern fantasy. And because I was just immersed in the stories, rather than trying to figure out how to convey the emotions the characters were feeling, I believed in love. I had a crush in high school, but the less said about that, the better. I thought Micha and I were in love, but really it was just friendship, with sex.

To Brian, that was all love was: a way you agreed to act in public with a certain good friend, and if you acted well together, you formalized it. Or, in our case, just carried on doing it, since at the time marriage didn't really enter into our thinking except as a political crusade.

But I thought that love was the opposite of acting. Sex is the physical act of putting yourself in a position where you can't help but be honest, where your body flails about and your tongue hangs out and you make crazy noises and that's all you. And you choose the person you love to do it with, and they do the same thing, and you've seen—maybe not each others'

souls, but a little glimpse into what you both are, sharing a private part of yourselves. Love is the natural extension of that, allowing you to relax and be yourself with someone. Dropping the act we put on every day. Because Brian was right in that regard: we're always acting, one way or another. It's just that for most of us, it's tiring. At the end of the day, we want to go home and relax with someone who doesn't need us to be anyone other than who we are. And finding that person is hard. It's really, really hard.

I don't think Brian ever did.

It takes me longer to dry my fur, and when I come out of the shower, he's half-dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed, shirtless. He smiles as I walk out, and the look in his eyes is appreciative of my naked body, but not lustful, not now. It's also a little distant. He's been thinking.

"It is weird," he starts. "Being here, like this."

I nod, selecting a loose pair of shorts, and then I set them aside. I'm not intending to go out again. "I like it, though."

"Me too," he says quickly, and then tilts his muzzle. "It's just sinking in that football's over. I mean, over. I guess I'll spend the spring working out and maybe see if I can get invited to the combine, but... I might never put on a uniform again."

I sit beside him and rest a paw on his. "You will, you dope," I say. "You're too good. There were scouts there today, you know."

His ears perk up. "I figured there would be. But they were probably all here to see Seito."

His hopeful eyes and twitching tail belie his attempts to be humble. "Probably," I say lightly.

"Was that Dragons scout there again?" He flicks his tail across mine.

"Which one?" I affect ignorance, and he slips a paw up to my sheath. "You know the one," he says, squeezing.

I squirm, wagging my tail, thinking of a time when he wouldn't even be comfortable sitting next to me when I'm naked. "Oh, that one. Yes, he was there."

"Did you talk to him?" His paw remains where it is.

"What would I have to say to him?" I yelp theatrically as he squeezes again. "Okay, okay, maybe I might've exchanged a couple words with him."

He grins and lets me go. I lean against him and he slides his arm around me. "So?"

"So he says we had some nice weather today."

Dev sighs and shakes his head. "Foxes," he grumbles.

I tell him, eventually, and we share some more time affirming our relationship in this new environment before he has to get back to the team. He leaves me with a kiss and a sigh, and a promise to meet for lunch again.

I'm exhausted from the day, so I fall asleep before Salim gets back and we don't really talk until we're on the way home again. I'm staring out the window, only half listening to the music, and his laughter snaps me out of it. I glance back over at him without saying anything, and I see his grin.

"I've never seen you this quiet before," he says.

"I'm a little tired."

He nods. "I think I have changed my mind." I flick my ears curiously to him. "About what?"

"I was going to say you should give up the football player. When you first told me about him, I thought it was just a temporary, a what does Allen call it? A fling. You know, a thrill. Then I thought you were just carrying it a little far, because it was dangerous. You told me there was more, but... I did not see it."

"I like the danger," I chuckle.

"But there is more. That is obvious."

"Yeah." I rest my muzzle on one paw. "Salim?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think that sex is really essential to love? I mean, can you survive a relationship if the sex goes through dry spells?"

He peers across the car. "Forgive me, but the room did not smell like a dry spell."

My ears flush a bit, but I grin. "No, I... I was just wondering. What you think, I mean."

He shrugs. "There is little to be gained from planning for drought during a monsoon."

My tail twitches behind me. "I'm just wondering, you know." "I have never had the problem."

"Me neither." But that doesn't mean I don't want to talk about it. I love Salim, and he's a great friend, but it's hard to engage him in academic discussions. He's a mechanical engineer, very concrete. Sometimes he's so cultured, I forget that.

I'm quiet for a little while longer, thinking about Dev and his future and me and my future and us and our future, and when Salim breaks the silence again, what he says isn't a surprise because the spotted skunk has been in the back of my mind all day.

"I still think you should tell Brian."

It was over a year ago, back in Patty's just off Forester U. campus. Patty's is a gay-friendly bar, but not a gay bar, where Brian and I used to have some of our late night conversations. One Sunday, our sophomore year, we asked the bartender to turn on the football games, and eventually that became our hangout to watch football.

On this particular Sunday night, I was studying and Brian was more than a little tipsy. He'd kissed the guy he was seeing at the time right there in the bar, and the guy got a little miffed at the PDA and left. That's Public Display of Affection, one of the things we talked about a lot in FLAG. I got that much from him, and the rest from Brian, later.

A couple linebackers from the football team had decided to stop in to watch the rest of the Sunday night game over a beer. Talk in the bar turned to the predictably dismal performance of the Forester team the previous year, and because Brian was involved, the discussion was both well-informed and merciless.

Brian claims he didn't start it. He said the two football players were boasting that they were better than the Dragons (who are bad, but not that bad). They say he started ragging on the Forester football team, and when one of them said, "Do you know who we are?" he said, "Sure, I'd know that ass anywhere." Brian officially denies he said that, but to me, he said, "I dunno. I was pretty wasted. Sounds like something I'd say, doesn't it?"

There were a lot of things he'd said in the past about Forester's football team. Thinking about him saying them in a bar to a couple of Forester's football players still makes me wince.

They say he hit on them despite numerous firm rebuffs. He's pretty sure he didn't. I trust him on that one. It sounds more likely that they saw him with his date and decided that this uppity faggot who thought he knew about football needed a lesson.

Whatever the motivation, they waited until the game was over, then followed him out of the bar. I don't know what happened next, because neither does he. He remembers a little about exchanging jabs with the football players. Then he woke up in the hospital with a broken jaw, two broken ribs, and a concussion.

The players claim they just followed him for a little while and then walked off without any more contact. Nobody believed them, but it was just enough to keep them from being charged with assault. Brian's blood-alcohol was about .14 when he was brought in, so his testimony wasn't

going to be reliable. The players were kicked off the football team because of the bad publicity and because they weren't starting anyway, so the coach could afford to make the gesture. And once they'd lost their football status, the word spread through campus, in the way that things spread through a community, that they were pretty proud of having beaten up Brian and gotten away with it.

While Brian was in the hospital, I visited him two or three nights a week, as often as I could, and we hatched out various revenge plots, the more ludicrous, the better. What he hadn't told me was that his parents were facilitating paperwork to get him transferred to another school to start the spring semester. He told me right before we left for Christmas break.

I was crushed. He said his parents insisted, wouldn't listen to him, that he'd tried to talk them out of it until the last minute. I almost believed him, the great actor.

Salim's right, I know. So I call Brian on Sunday night, when he'd told me he'd be home from his trip.

He picks up on the second ring. "Hi, Wiley." The sound of his voice, the reality of our contact, takes me back in time a year or more. That only underscores how much things have changed.

"Hey, Brian."

He never lets a silence become awkward. "Glad you finally caught up with me."

"Thanks for leaving such detailed instructions." "They seemed necessary."

Parry. Dodge. Riposte. "So when are you back in town?"

"Week before Christmas. I have finals 'til the 19th, coming back the 20th. When do you leave?"

"Twenty-second."

Brian leaves just enough of a pause for me to offer to meet him. When I don't, he presumes. "So it looks like we might actually get together. Dinner on the 21st?"

"I have a final at one. I could meet you around four."

"That's an early dinner."

"I have dinner plans."

He knows immediately what that means. "Your last night on campus? Oh, Wiley, why not invite me along? I'd love to meet him."

He's daring me to contradict him, to tell me it's not a boyfriend I haven't told him about, and I'm almost ready to lie, but I can't. Not to him.

He'd know.

"Sorry," I say. "Three's a crowd, remember?"

He's sent me home with that line on more than one occasion. "Touché," he says. "So now I know why you've been avoiding me."

"I wasn't lying about being out of town this weekend," I say.

"I know," he says. "I checked."

"I knew you would."

"Where'd you go?"

"Salim and I just took a little road trip."

"You're dating Salim?"

"I didn't say that." There's something invigorating about circling around and around like this. I know eventually he'll get to the truth, but he enjoys this as much as I do. Probably more.

"So where'd you go?"

"Chikewa Falls."

He's been following Forester, of course. "Sucky game," he says. "But we looked okay."

"Better than we've looked in years."

"That Seito is going to the pros."

"He looked like a pro. He demolished us."

"We've got a pretty good DB, though. That tiger, Miski. He's really come on this year."

My throat is dry. "Yeah," I manage.

"Darron is pretty good, too. He might end up in the Arena League. And that kid at wideout, the fox. He's gonna be good too."

"No doubt," I say, feeling a little smug that he didn't notice our left guard.

"So what's going on, Wiley? Who are you seeing? Why are you avoiding me?"

He's trying to catch me off guard. It's so childish it annoys me. "Why," I say tartly, "do you assume it's all about you?"

"Because it usually is."

"You still acting there at East Bumfuck?"

"That's East Dumbfuck, and yes, of course I'm still acting. An actor doesn't abandon his craft because of a minor setback."

"Couple more 'minor setbacks' could kill you, Spotty."

He gives me a throaty laugh. "Always watching out for me. Don't worry, I watch myself now. I only act appropriately gay."

"You're the 'gay best friend'?"

"Absolutely. I just need a gorgeous lady to give relationship advice to. How about you? How's everyone at FLAG?" "They're fine. Keith is still a tool."

"So I hear. They're still doing good work though, right? Where was the picnic this year?"

Every fall, FLAG holds an outdoor picnic, just sort of a "hey, come look at the fags, we're not scary" thing. This is the first year I didn't go. I try to remember what the guys told me, or what Salim told me, about it. Because, I suddenly realize, he's laid another trap for me, and if I confess to not knowing about it, he's going to ask why. "It was outside of Booker Hall," I say, which is where it's been two of the three years I did go.

There's only a slight pause, not enough for me to tell if I got it right or not. "Was it fun?" he says.

"It was okay. Missed you there, though." I might as well play it to the hilt, right or wrong.

"Yeah. Wish I could've been there." I relax a little bit. Either I got it right or he doesn't know.

We exchange some more small talk and then he signs off with "Good to talk to you again, Wiley."

"Good to talk to you, too," I say, and we hang up. I try not to think too much about his tone when he said that last thing, about it being good to talk to me. It was sincere, and a little resigned. He knows I'm hiding something, and I think he thinks he knows what it is.

I wonder if I haven't just made a huge mistake.

The spring after Brian left, I spent a lot of time with the FLAG guys and the theater group. That's where all my friends were. I talked to Brian all the time that spring, but what I didn't tell him was that I was formulating my own plan to get back at football players in general. And I certainly didn't tell him when the plan succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. Or when it went further than that.

I should've told him about that first night with Dev. I was so proud of myself, putting one over on the big jock, giving him his first gay experience. But here's the thing. I really expected him to get out as soon as he could.

He stayed the night.

I didn't expect to see him again, but I knew it was different when I talked to Brian that week. I should've boasted, I should've crowed about it, but I couldn't figure out what to say. I guess I was thinking something like,

I'll wait and see how it turns out. I knew I was an idiot. I didn't even know why I wanted to see him again. It didn't matter. It'd never happen except on the football field or in my dreams.

He came back.

It became something more than just a prank, and the more it went on, the more I couldn't tell Brian about it. I stopped going to FLAG, too, because they all knew Brian; not only would they judge me, they'd tell him. The theater group, at least, never asked too much about my personal life. I started hanging out with Salim just to be able to talk to someone, to build a bridge between that part of my life and this one. I couldn't talk to Dev about the activism stuff. I couldn't talk to anyone else about him. I was having a lot of fun with Dev and his friends, sometimes at their expense and sometimes not, and I was really enjoying the theater group, but there was still something missing.

The thing was, I didn't know what that was. Brian made sure to remind me. Big time.

My last final is brutal, three essays chosen out of six possible questions. I write up to the last minute, exchange weary grins of triumph with the other students, and walk out. I get to Goose's ten minutes early. Of course, Brian's not there yet.

Goose's is the same as it always is. Even in the lull between lunch and dinner, there are students whose finals ended when mine did, relaxing over coffee, pie, sandwiches, cookies, Goose's famous meatloaf, or just the free water. The pictures on the walls show virtually the same Goose's I sit down at: packed with students of all species chattering over grey checked tablecloths, eating the same meals and served by, in some cases, the exact same waitresses.

"Hi, hon." A tall ferret comes up. "Coffee?"

"Hi, Bev." Bev's one of the ones in one of the old pictures. She kind of knows me from when Brian and I used to hang out here. "Just a sparkling water."

"You got it." She scribbles something down and walks away.

I smell Brian before I see him. I cup my ears to follow him as he slides into the booth across from me.

Same old Brian. Black fur with white spots, physique hovering between slender and scrawny, silk shirt draped over his narrow shoulders, twill slacks. Slacks 'n' jeans, they used to call us fall semester of sophomore year, a memory that dislodges and floats to the surface as I

watch him sit down.

It's so strange to be this close to him again. At Goose's, with Bev bringing my water and looking down at Brian as though he'd just been in there the day before, saying, "Coffee?" and him nodding, it could be my freshman year, or sophomore year, or early junior year. But when Brian finally looks into my eyes and says, "Wiley Farrel," I can see the chipped lower canine. When he turns his head, I can see the sun shine through the notch in his ear. He's marked, just as marked as I am, and I know he can see the marks on me just as well.

"So," he says, looking up at the pictures. "Still the same."

"Never changes." I look steadily at him across the table. "So how you been?"

He shrugs. "Settled in. There's a good theater group."

"Really good?"

He grins. "Better, now."

"Course they are." Same old Brian. "So should we get this out of the way, or what?"

"Oh, Wiley. At least wait 'til I get my coffee." He flashes me a coy smile, and right on cue, Bev comes up with his coffee and plunks it down. He saw her behind me, of course.

"Thanks," he says to her. He blows on his coffee, takes his time stirring some sugar into it, then brings it to his lips. I take a drink of my water. He pretends not to notice me watching him.

Finally, he puts the cup down. "So," he says, looking right at me. "I know what's going on."

"Really." My heart pounds with fear and relief. It'll be so much easier if I don't have to tell him.

"You're seeing a femme."

I want to laugh, but it comes out as a half-laugh, half-choking hiccup. Brian looks at me strangely, but I wave him to go on. "It all fits," he says, but less certainly. "You're seeing someone you don't want to tell me about. You've stopped going to the FLAG meetings. You're trying to go straight because you're scared of what happened to me."

I can't help it. My rear is still feeling the memory of Dev's big cock. "Oh, sister," I giggle. "I don't think I've ever been less straight."

Annoyance flickers across his muzzle; the realization, I know, that his prepared speech is out the window. I hear his tail thwap the seat. "So, what, you just stopped going to FLAG because it was boring?"

"Of course it was boring without you there." My moment has been

postponed, but only temporarily. "You told me it would be. Keith doesn't have your sense of timing."

"Nobody does, sister."

"And he certainly doesn't have your humility."

Brian smirks. "So you joined some national activist group? Lambda?" "Not really."

"And you're dating... a kangaroo?" "You always hated kangaroos."

"Still do." He sips his coffee. "Is it something I did, Wiley?"

Oh, the guilt, the pain. "Yes, Spotty." I put a paw to my chest. "You done broke mah poor foxy heart."

"Don't give me that," he says. "Yo' foxy heart ain't never been cracked, much less broke."

"Not for lack of trying."

He sets down the cup. "All right. Cut the shit. What's going on? Just tell me, already."

Here it goes. "I'm seeing a guy." I feel like I'm coming out to my parents all over again.

He waits, then says, "That's a start. Does he have a name?"

"Yeah. Devlin. Devlin Miski."

"Okay." It takes him a second. "Wait a minute. Miski? The tiger?" He gapes. "From the football team?"

"Yeah." I can't tell how he's going to react. He's still stunned. The tension is killing me, so I say something inane. "He's really nice."

"Nice?" His voice is sharp. Not loud, just sharp. "That bundle of overmedicated hormonal muscle is nice?" He points to his cracked tooth. "Does this look nice?"

"He didn't do that," I say sharply.

"Oh, like it matters," he snaps right back. "You think they're not all cut from the same cloth? They hit people for a living. It's bound to get into their lives. Didn't you read the studies?"

"He's not like that."

"He's too good not to be," Brian shoots back. "One day, you'll end up with worse than this."

"I can take care of myself." I fold my arms.

"Oh, yeah. Have you ever actually used your so-called fighting skills?"

"I passed the test for *nikyu* last year."

"The real world doesn't have pads, Tippy."

"Then maybe I'll have the good sense not to be drunk, Spotty."

He glares. "If you had good sense, you wouldn't be going around with

a fucking jock."

"He's not just a jock." People at the next table are staring curiously at us. I lower my voice. "I started out doing it for you."

"For me?" He shakes his head. "What, so we could have matching scars? The hospital is not a bonding experience."

"Forget it." I suddenly don't want to go there, remembering all my earlier fears. But Brian is far from done.

"Is this another stage of your eternal quest to prove you're better than me? I hit on a couple football players, so you date one? How did you hook up with him, anyway? Personals? 'Fox skilled at one-upsmanship seeking cock attached to hunk of muscle for self-validation'?"

I growl softly. Gloves are off, now. "Maybe I was just looking for someone who wouldn't run away from a fight."

His jaw clicks shut, and then he chuckles grimly. "That's a laugh. What have you been doing but running away? Really invested in ensuring your civil rights now that you're getting fucked regularly, aren't you, slut? Been taking your muscleboy to the FLAG meetings? Or is he keeping you in the closet with his uniforms?"

"He's not 'keeping me' anywhere. You wouldn't understand."

"Understand what? How the fox I used to talk to about attending national marches is not even going to the local campus activities any more? How you didn't even know where the picnic was this year? Hell, Wiley, I knew where it was! Because unlike you, I've been following FLAG and fighting for my rights."

"Yeah, you've been a big help from East Bumfuck," I say. "Pretty easy to back away and lob stones from a distance, isn't it?"

"My parents..."

"Oh, fuck that." I'm snarling, and I'm not just angry at him. I hate myself when I snarl, but I can't help it. "You wanted to get out of here. You ran away."

He leans forward. "Can you imagine me going through this year as 'that fag who got beat up'?"

"Yeah, I can," I say. "You'd be a symbol. You could do some good. You could speak out."

"Easy for you to say," he says, and his voice is bitter. "I don't want to relive it over and over."

"So you only want to fight in ways that you're comfortable fighting. Never mind what might do the most good."

His eyes gleam and sharpen, and my fur prickles. "What about you?"

Going to out your football player when he goes pro?"

"No," I say flatly, "and neither are you."

"But Tip, that would do the most good. What's the matter? Only want to fight in ways you're comfortable fighting?"

"That would hurt him. And it would hurt me."

"He's going to hurt you anyway. One way or another. When he gets to the pros, he's going to be swimming in money and under pressure to be straight, from the rest of the primitives and from the drooling masses who follow them. You'll be an inconvenience, an afterthought, a memory. If you believe otherwise, you're an idiot."

"Then I'm an idiot." I pour the last of my water down my throat. "At least I'm an idiot with a boyfriend."

"For now. Until he punches you."

"Could you take 'repeat' off your 'dire warning' CD there, Spotty?"

"Hey, I know the signs, Tip. Cuts you off from your friends—check. Cuts you off from your support network—check."

"He doesn't give a shit about the FLAG meetings. That was my decision."

"Because you thought he wouldn't like it."

"No. Because of you."

He's startled. For the first time, I think, a genuine reaction. "Me?"

I lean back. "Yeah, you. Because I knew you'd react this way, and I didn't want anyone else getting the chance to see your drama queen act. It's so entertaining."

"Fuck you, Tip. I'm serious here. This guy's no good for you." I am sick of this conversation. "You have absolutely no idea what's good for me."

"Oh, come on. I haven't been away that long. If you'd talk to me more..."

"Are you going to act like this every time we talk?"

Bev appears with a refill for his coffee. We clam up immediately. She asks if I want another water and I say, "Just tap."

She looks back and forth between us and says, "How about a pipe of peace?"

"I don't smoke," Brian says tightly, and Bev shrugs and leaves. She's broken the rhythm of the conversation. We stare at each other in silence, and I finally say, "So how are the classes there?"

"Oh," he says as Bev comes back with the water, "the teachers all suck. But the students are worse. At least the theater is good."

We talk about school for a while, circling each other warily, and manage to finish the conversation without resuming the argument. But we both know it's still there, and around six, when I check the clock and say I need to get going soon, he takes a step back into the ring.

"So, will I get to meet him?"

I study his muzzle. "Not yet. I don't think I'm ready for that."

"It's okay," he says, his ears going down. "Probably all cramped in your closet, anyway."

If I start in on him again, I'll miss dinner with Dev. So I just stand up and say, "I'll be in touch," and grab his paw to shake it as he starts to get up. No hug. I know it's bitchy, but I can't bring myself to do it.

"Thanks for meeting. And for telling me," he says.

"Thanks for taking it so well."

We stare at each other another moment, and then I walk out with a wave, leaving him sitting at a grey checkered table in Goose's, with Bev ready to bring him a plate of Goose's famous meatloaf.

And damn him, I can't get his words out of my head, all the way back to my place, as I change, and all the way to the restaurant. *Really invested in ensuring your civil rights now that you're getting fucked regularly, aren't you, slut? All cramped in your closet.* I think about how I had to talk Dev into having this dinner at a restaurant rather than my apartment, about how reluctant he is to be seen with me in public, even at our harmless lunches.

I try to remind myself of the progress he's made, tell myself that it's a slow and steady course. It doesn't help. I've conveniently pushed aside the fox I used to be, the activist with noble goals, for the fox I've become, hiding my head in orange-and-black striped sand. And Brian, with a friend's perception and his own unique cruelty, has plucked that out of everything else and thrust it in my face so I can't ignore it any longer.

If it weren't the last day of the semester, if I weren't leaving tomorrow for holidays which suddenly feel meaningless, I would cancel the dinner with Dev. I know myself well enough to know that in the mood I'm in, I'm likely to say something that hurts him. I start to wonder if I've perhaps learned too much from Brian over the years. Can't be helped, though; I need to see Dev, and I damn well need to make sure he has a good time, so I'm going to have to watch my muzzle carefully.

Chez Jacques is an upscale place, but it's college-upscale, meaning it's something I can actually afford my share of, if I fill up on bread and have a

salad for dinner. Dev picked the place; that was part of our deal. I insisted on a restaurant, but he got to choose it.

He's already waiting when I arrive. "Hi," he says, and looks a little bit surprised. Usually when we go out, I dress up in drag. This time, spurred by Brian's words, I've dressed up in a nice formal outfit. With pants.

"How do I look?" I goad him deliberately, already losing my battle with myself.

He meets my eyes and smiles, guilelessly. "You look nice," he says. "How about me?"

He's gorgeous, in a spiffy grey checked suit and red tie. He's even got a suit vest on underneath. "You look nice too," I say, calming a little. "How long for our table?"

"Just waiting for you," he says, and signals to the maitre'd, a fussy skunk who comes over and hands us off to a ferret waiter. The ferret weaves through the tables, guiding us to a little two-seater in a dim alcove beside a curtained window.

The restaurant itself is beautiful, a study in deep maroon with brown and gold accents, soft plush carpets, paintings that are interesting without being pretentious, and recessed lighting that gives the place a soft, romantic glow. All of the couples I see are male-female, with one exception that looks like father-son. My activist brain, like some atavistic reflex, twitches once before I tell it to shut up.

The table is lovely, too, with linen napkins, a red candle burning in an elegant silver candleholder, and six pieces of silverware at each place. I pick up one of the three forks and twirl it. "My Uncle Rob used to say that he never wanted to eat at a restaurant nice enough to require a different fork for every course."

Dev grins at me. "Well, the Sizzler was all booked up."

"That was Uncle Rob," I say, replacing the fork. "Dad thinks he was adopted."

"So this is okay?"

I snap my jaw shut on my first response when I realize he's not asking me if this dinner is enough payment to buy my values. "It's great," I say, and he relaxes, relieved.

It is, too. Dev asks me to order wine, and my resolution to stick to bread and salad vanishes almost immediately, as I pair a dry chardonnay with a salmon tartare appetizer and order my salad anyway, baby spinach with caramelized walnuts and blue cheese. I'm going to order an entree, too, I know. I'm too hungry not to. I'll just have to ask for money from the

folks when I get home.

The salmon is amazing. We eat it in respectful silence before Dev starts talking about his Christmas vacation. Dinner and caroling, tree and presents, and maybe he'll actually have a nice holiday this time. He's got parental and sibling issues, but his performance this football season has raised his status in their eyes, and it seems likely that he really will have a good time this vacation. I sure hope so.

"What about you, Lee?" We've gotten our salads. The sharp cheeses and pleasantly sour dressing make my tongue tingle. I don't get to eat out like this very often, not without my parents.

"Oh... the usual," I say. "Our turn to host the relatives. I think my cousin's pumped out another cub in the past year, so there'll be three of them running around. I'll stay in my room and try to ignore everything except for a token appearance on Christmas for presents and dinner. At least with them around I won't have to sit through the home movies." If I'm lucky.

"Aw, Lee," he says, "don't you like the holidays?"

I shrug. "I used to."

We've talked about Dev's family, but not so much about mine. He knows my parents came to see 'Square Room' once, but not what they thought about it. He knows I'm out to them, but not what they think about that. He doesn't know I spent the Christmas after my sophomore year with Brian, in an off-campus apartment belonging to one of the seniors in FLAG who probably assumed we were just going to screw all week, when in reality we watched TV, got mildly drunk, cooked the worst Christmas dinner ever, and had incredible amounts of fun; nor that my parents made me feel so guilty about missing the holiday that I didn't dare miss the next one.

"I don't either," he says, "but I still try to have fun over the holidays."

"Because it's important to them, right?" I say, violating my rule to think about my words twice before letting them out.

"Yeah," he says, his ears sinking lower, eyes narrowing a bit. "Because I care about them."

"Even though they don't really care about you?"

"They care about me," he says, but there's a note of protest rather than affirmation. "You don't even know my parents."

"I know what you've told me," I say, and then I take a drink of wine and let the flavor and the warmth overwhelm me for a moment. It's good wine. He's starting to respond, but I cut him off. "Listen, forget it."

The waiter takes our salad plates away. Dev takes a sip of wine and peers over the table at me. "What's wrong?" he says simply. He looks a little annoyed, but I guess the wine is working on him too.

I start to snap that he doesn't have to worry about it, that it's not his job to make me feel better. But this time, I manage to catch myself. "I'll be okay," I said.

"I didn't ask that," he says, more sharply. "I asked what was wrong."

And now I'm caught in another trap; having talked to Brian about Dev, I find myself reluctant to talk to Dev about Brian. I don't know why, but while I'm sorting it out I give as good as I'm getting. "I know what you asked," I say.

"You sure didn't act like it," he retorts. "Do you have so much trouble believing that I really do care?"

"Not as long as we're in our apartment with our clothes off, I don't," I say back, which is not really the right thing to say anywhere in public, let alone a fairly quiet restaurant, but I keep my voice pitched low and I don't think anyone else can hear me.

"I brought us here, didn't I?" he says, his ears flattening.

"That wasn't your first choice."

"No, but..." He snaps his mouth shut, and his look is all wrong. He's not mad, he's hurt, and he's hurt more than he should be.

I remember vividly going on a field trip to a museum when I was ten. We split into pairs for the day, and my partner and I—I can't even remember his name now—just wandered through the museum having a great time. When we got to the classroom the next day, the teacher started calling on us to talk about the things we'd seen that related to the lesson, and my partner and I stared at each other in horror as we realized that we'd both missed this critical instruction and had basically sent the whole day goofing off. My fur prickled and my ears laid back and flushed as I slowly understood what was going on and that I'd missed something important that I should've caught.

I have that feeling now. My ears flush, and my fur prickles. "But what?" I say.

"It's nothing," he waves a paw.

"Oh, please," I say. "Don't sit there with your ears back, your eyes down, your tail drooping, and tell me it's nothing."

"You can't see my tail," he says.

"I don't have to. Even your whiskers are sad."

"I shouldn't have said anything," he says.

And I get another sort of revelation then, that I can't ask him to tell me what's wrong with him if I won't tell him what's wrong with me. Yeah, he's a big dumb jock, but first of all, he's not as dumb as he looks, not by a long shot. Second, he's my big dumb jock. So I say, "Fine. I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."

His golden eyes flicker up, meeting mine. He pauses, long enough that I know he's serious about whatever it is, that he wasn't just putting this on to get me to talk. "All right," he says quietly. "You go first."

I can't rightly refuse that. "I talked to Brian today," I say, getting it out right away. "I told him about us."

"Oh," he said quietly. "It didn't go well?"

"It went about as I thought it would," I said.

"So, not well?"

"Not particularly. But it's better than not talking to him, I guess. At least now I'm not hiding anything."

Yeah, that last statement was a barb, and he catches it. He growls, "You think this is easy for me?"

I take another drink of my wine, because I'm not liking myself very much right now. It gives me the time to toss aside my first response and replace it with, "No, I know it isn't. So what was bothering you?"

"It's really not worth..." he starts, and I stop him.

"Come on, you promised."

He looks away. "Well," he says, hesitating and a little growly still, "you know, the reason I suggested having dinner in your apartment was... I guess part of it was just that it was easier than going out, but I am glad we went out... but it was also that... I was going to try to cook a dinner for you."

I'm spared having to respond by the arrival of our food, which is a good thing, because I'm feeling like a total ass. The roasted chicken in a light citrus glaze smells great, but I can't bring myself to take a bite of it. Dev digs into his steak, still watching me, and says, "Lee?"

I push my chair back, choke out, "I'll be right back," and walk away as quickly as I can without running. I find the restrooms and push into the men's, dart into an unoccupied stall, lock the door, sit down, and start crying.

I wasn't ready for that unexpected warmth from my tiger, not after the chilly meeting with Brian. And I didn't expect to start crying. I just got that blossom of warmth in my chest and the pressure down my muzzle and I knew if I didn't get up from the table, I'd end up making some kind of

scene. I'm sure the wine had something to do with it, but not all of it.

For the past several months, I've been struggling to figure out who I am. I thought I knew. Running around with Brian, I was so sure of it, and so proud, in many senses of the word. For Brian to come back and cut like he did hurt me, and part of what hurt, of course, is the realization that he is right. I am more concerned with getting laid than with advancing the cause of gay rights everywhere.

And what Dev did, just now, is take all that selfish behavior of mine, that betrayal of my Fellows of the Pink Triangle, and make it right.

Because that's what being gay is about. No; that's what being alive is about. It's love. Whether we articulate it or not, what we're fighting for is the right to love whom we want in the manner we're born to. Sometimes we lose sight of that, in all the politics and symbolism we get caught up in. Dev just reminded me of it. This dinner, the look in his eyes, the night in the hotel in Chikewa Falls, it's all because I chose him over the movement. It's the reminder that my betrayal isn't really a betrayal. It's the exercising of the rights we are fighting for. That he came from where he did to the point where he can express affection—love—for me, that is a gift, and a victory.

What hurts and touches me is that that gift came to me as I was at my worst (or, well, heading in that direction). He took me in my crappy mood and still loves me, even if he won't say the words. So I sit and press my muzzle into my paws, dampness slowly leaking out into them. I can't let Dev see me like this, I just can't. The funny thing is that he probably has no idea what he just did. He's probably worried that he offended me, and I should go back and rectify that. That thought is the one that makes me take a couple deep breaths and pull myself together.

I sniffle and wipe my nose across my paw. Some toilet paper helps wipe my muzzle clean, dries my eyes, and prepares me to get back to the table.

He looks up as I approach, and as I'd feared, his ears are folded back. He looks up at me and tries to snap, "Where did you go?" But there's no authority to it, and he doesn't even wait for me to reply. "I'm sorry, Lee," he says. "I know I did something wrong. I'm not real good at this yet."

"Oh, shut up, stud," I say, only barely able to restrain myself from hugging him right there in the restaurant. I sit down and give him a big smile, full-on, perked ears and bouncy whiskers and all.

He brightens a bit. "So you're okay?"

"More than okay," I say, and dig into the chicken. "Stop worrying so

much and let's finish dinner so we can get back to my place, hm?" He's got his tail curled under the table, and I flip mine underneath to rest on his.

He looks up, chewing a piece of steak, and deliberately chews it slower, curling his tail up against mine. I flick it back and forth and go on eating my chicken, matching the slow bites he's taking. We make small talk and finish our meal, tails still touching.

Back at my apartment, we do our traditional slam-the-door-and-dive-into-each-other's-muzzles dance. This time, though, I don't shove my paws down his pants. He's got me pressed back against the door, hard, so he can't get his paws anywhere but my pants, but I slip mine around his back and just hold him, savoring the reassuring weight of him and the warmth of our tongues playing together.

His paw cups the front of my pants, and he growls softly, rubbing. I press back against him, arms tightening around him. He pulls back from the kiss, leaving my tongue hanging in the air and an undoubtedly goofy look on my muzzle. "I like it better when you wear the skirt," he says.

For a minute, I think he's saying he likes me better dressed as a woman. Then I see the sparkle in his eyes and realized he's trying to goad me. So I give him a nasty grin back, and say, "It's all the same once it's off."

From that point, the tenderness is on hold until we're panting, exhausted, naked, and sticky in bed. Usually I get up to shower pretty quickly, but this time I don't want to leave the warmth between us. Months ago, lying in the curl of his arm next to his broad chest, my paw on his stomach, would have felt awkward. Hell, weeks ago it would've been a little awkward. Now it feels right, and I don't want to do anything to spoil it. So I hesitate, and then say, "I'm gonna miss you."

He leans back against the pillow, still whuffing softly. "Yeah, me too."

"I was thinking," I say, hesitating, "maybe I could call you on Christmas."

He's quiet, processing that for a bit. "Yeah," he says finally. "Call me."

"Can I talk to your mom?" I say, nosing him in the neck.

He growls and squeezes me. "Don't push it."

Our minds must be following that remark in similar directions, because after a little silence, he says, "I don't think I'll ever be able to take you home."

Which I'd just been thinking about, too. "Why, mom and dad not into the whole 'fag' thing?"

He flinches. "Not so much, really." He turns his head so his muzzle is

touching mine, our eyes less than a hand's breadth apart. "I suppose your parents are fine with it."

I return his look evenly. "They know about it." Which he already knew. Hard for them not to, when their son comes home with a stack of "Queer Fox Power" stickers and wears his pink triangle button all over. "Do you want this to be more than just an at-school thing?"

His eyes remain level with mine, but their focus slides away, and then he turns his head to rest back against the pillow again. "I don't want to think about that right now."

"We're going to have to think about it sometime," I say. "At least sometime in the next six months. You know, before graduation."

"I don't want to think about it *now*" he says.

"Suit yourself," I say, and bury my nose in his shoulder.

A moment later, he sighs. "I don't know, Lee. It's just so strange, still. I just barely feel normal like this."

"You feel normal to me."

He squeezes me again, with affection this time. "Maybe that was the wrong word. I feel good like this. And all that stuff I learned in church and school boils down to the fact that we're not hurting anyone and we both feel good, so that's it, right? What's wrong with it? But it's more complicated. There's my folks, and friends, and..."

And football. "Yeah, I know," I say. "If it'll help, it's complicated for me, too."

"Really? I thought you had everything figured out two moves ahead." His paws tickle my side, teasing me.

I squirm happily, and then the downstairs buzzer rings.

I know who it is immediately, and so I reach for it. Dev says, "You're expecting someone?"

"Not really," I say. "I hoped he wouldn't come. Go away, Brian," I say as I hit the buzzer.

His voice comes back, not slurred. Good. He's not drunk, just buzzed. "Let me in. I know he's there. I just wanna say hi."

"Go away."

"What's the matter, Tip? Did I catch you in the middle of things? Sorry about that. I thought you never took longer than five minutes. Maybe that was with all the other guys."

I release the intercom and lay back in the bed with a sigh.

"Your best friend?" Dev says quietly.

The intercom buzzer sounds again. "Once," I say, without reaching for

it. "Now, I don't know. We've developed some... philosophical differences." But 'developed' isn't right; they were always there, just under the surface and theoretical.

It goes off again, and another time. "Like when to leave each other alone?" Dev says.

"Among other things." I growl softly and get out of bed, padding naked to the closet to grab my robe.

"Can't you just turn down the volume?"

"You must be thinking of those ritzy places you athletes live in," I say, cinching the robe loosely around my waist. "Just stay like that. I'll be right back."

"You sure you don't want me to come down?" he says as I open the door.

"Positive. I can handle this." I slip outside and start down the two flights of stairs, hoping I can live up to my bravado.

He's leaning against the doorframe, looking bored as he presses the button over and over. When he sees me, he perks up his ears and smiles. "I knew you wouldn't let me down," he says through the glass, and puts a paw on the handle, waiting for me to buzz it open.

I fold my arms. "I came down to tell you to go home, Brian."

"Aw, Tip, I came all the way here. I promise, I won't cause a scene."

"You already have," I say. "Why can't you just let well enough alone?"

"Because I don't want to see you hurt!" He matches my tone. "Because I care about you!"

"This isn't about me. This is about you."

"Don't be like that. Come on, just let me in. I just want to come in and make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine. You happy? Now get out of here."

"I can't believe you're doing this. As long as we've been friends. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Doesn't it mean anything to you?" I counter. "Of course it does. That's why I'm here!"

I sigh and shake my head. "I'm not going to let you in. You know I'm as stubborn as you are."

"Oh, Tip, you don't have the slightest—" His eyes widen. I hear heavy treads on the stair behind me. Great. Just what I needed.

Dev's put his pants on and is on the bottom stair, looking at us. When I turn, I motion him back upstairs. The last thing I need is for him to threaten Brian, to make everything worse. He puts a finger on my muzzle and

crowds me forward to the door, sliding his arms around me to hold me against him. I look at his face and then squirm around to face Brian. We face him together.

He looks up at Dev and down at me. "So you're the one taking advantage of Wiley," he sneers, hiding his fear pretty well. I can see the twitch in his ears before he steadies them, and the way he brings his paws up in front of his stomach looks more nonchalant than it really is.

"Nobody's taking advantage of anyone," Dev rumbles. "We're just trying to have a nice talk and a sleep, and we'd appreciate it if you'd keep the noise down."

"I just wanted to say hi and meet you."

"And now you've said hi. Good night," Dev says, and starts to turn.

"If you hurt him," Brian says in a high, scared voice, "I'll hurt you twice as bad."

We turn back around, and Dev brings his paws up to my chest. "I love this fox," he says. "So don't you worry about that." And with that, he leaves Brian speechless, scoops me up in his arms, and carries me two stories up to the apartment. My robe hangs open enough for anyone passing by to see my sticky sheath, but I don't give a crap. I spend the whole time just leaning against Dev's shoulder, processing his words.

When he deposits me on the ground back in the quiet apartment, I'm grinning like a fool. He doesn't look me in the eye right away, but I keep quiet and I know he saw me. Finally, he looks up, shakes his head and says, "What?"

I poke him gently in his bare stomach. "I knew you loved me," I say with my best sly grin.

He rolls his eyes. "Foxes," he grumbles, and chases me back to the bed, where the robe and pants soon fall by the wayside, and, for now, everything is perfectly all right.



Watching Film (Lee)

December 2006

As of last year, if you grew up without siblings, you're three times more likely to be in therapy than if you had a brother or sister. Just a bit of empirical evidence that perhaps the undivided attention of your parents is not necessarily a good thing.

Over the years, part of our Christmas ritual has become the Reviewing Of The Past. Father loves to shoot home movies. We were the first family in Fox Hollow to have a camcorder, back when they were bulky things that nearly put him in the hospital with a strained back. Mother loves to show home movies, and since their chick (that would be me) flew the nest to attend college three and a half years ago, the Reviewing Of The Past has gone from "we're all sitting around stuffed after dinner, why not throw in some movies," to "Wiley! Come into the living room, we have to start the movies now or we won't be done by bedtime!"

It's December twenty-third, and the feature tonight is Memorial Day Barbecue 1992, starring Firefox Wiley, age 7. I press myself against the side of the sofa, curl my tail over my lap, dig my elbow into the arm of the couch and rest my head in my paw, watching the fourteen-year-old film. I can't tell anymore whether I remember this day or just think I remember it because I've seen the film so many times. It's one of Mother's favorites.

"You're so adorable in that little helmet," she says. I resist the temptation to tell her it got stolen by Jimmy Galgin in third grade, even though I know it's the next thing she'll ask. "Whatever happened to that?" she says.

She doesn't really want to know. That's just the cue for my father to make some comment about his friend the volunteer fireman, the one who gave it to me. "You know, Boll's second in line for the chief of the V.F.D. now," he says, right on his mark. "Vic Holbrush is fourth."

Vic is my age, a high school classmate who beat the concept of species sympathy right out of me. "Vic couldn't hit the urinal from a foot away," I say. "I had better aim at seven."

On the screen now, I've just turned on the water and am running back to the business end of the hose. In a minute, I'll spray my father and the barbecue grill, ruining fifty dollars' worth of steaks.

"Those were top choice sirloin from Morningstar Farm," my father

says, watching Firefox Wiley take aim. "Cost me fifty dollars. That was real money back in '92."

"It's real money now," I say.

"Do you need money, dear?" Mother's eyeshine appears in my peripheral vision as she turns toward me.

"Doesn't everybody?"

"He doesn't mind needing money," Father says, "or he wouldn't be majoring in English."

I've positioned my arm on the sofa so that I can see the faintly glowing numbers on my wristwatch. Technically, it's twenty-two minutes until I've told Dev I'll call him. I consider making up an excuse to leave, like another promised phone call. But then I'd have to find someone else to call until I could call Dev, and though there are a number of people I could try, I can't guarantee that any of them would answer. Then I'd have to explain why the person I was trying to call wasn't answering, and they'd give me a hard time when I left to make the call I'd really scheduled.

Lying would be more fun if it weren't so goddamn complicated.

The barbecue is dripping now. It's always amusing to sort out who's laughing and who's cursing during the next few minutes. Father's friends Kellen and Yolanda, whose names I only remember because it's Kellen's bushy white tail I run to hide behind later in this video, have pleasant laughs, oddly similar trebles. Mother's laugh is faster than it usually is, probably nervous because Father is cursing and so is the wolf who used to work with Father. Uncle Roger is doing both, and Aunt Millicent's trying vainly to straddle both sides. Their daughter, Amy, now married with two cubs, is somewhere inside.

"You were a good fireman," Mother says.

It's futile to point out that I was only seven and playing with a garden hose. "There wasn't even a fire," I say, "and besides, I was seven. Who picks their career based on dressing up at the age of seven?"

"Ruined fifty dollars worth of steaks," Father repeats.

"Didn't you have fun doing that?" Mother asks me.

I sigh. "Of course I did. Anytime I got to cause chaos and ruin something expensive of Father's, I had fun. But you don't base your life on what's fun, now, do you?"

"Wiley's right," Father says, but of course what the one paw supporteth, the other paw undermineth. "You pick a career based on

earning potential. At least, that's what I did."

We let that statement hang in the air, shifting on the leather sofa as the expensive wall projector plays movies onto the specially coated living room wall. Rather than steaks, my father is now serving burgers, and over the footage of my mother handing me one, his voice is clearly audible saying, "Great, he's getting rewarded for ruining my steaks." In spite of that, or maybe because I can hear it—my ears are fully perked, as they usually were back then—I bite into the burger with almost orgiastic glee, meat juices running through my white muzzle fur, ketchup dripping down my black paws. Mother's paw is visible in frame, the ineffective napkin easily dodged as I devour the burger.

"So what are you going to do?" my father asks. "Graduation's coming up, you know."

"Really?" I say. "They didn't tell us that."

My mother sighs. "I wish you wouldn't be like that," she says.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," I say, "but I'll figure something out. Okay?"

"Are you enjoying it?" I can see her eyeshine again.

"Yes, Mother. I love it. Can we talk about something else now?"

I'm ready to discuss anything else except for one area, which might as well have a homing device in it for as fast as Mother zeros in on it. "When are you going to bring home a nice vixen?" she says.

My watch reads 7:56. Close enough. "I have to make a phone call," I say, and get up, my shadow briefly obscuring my image on the wall before I move away, out of the living room.

Dev answers the phone on the third ring. I grasp at his deep, husky voice as if it were an airline seat cushion in an unplanned water landing. "Hi, handsome," I say in that Lauren Bacollie voice he loves.

"Having a good visit?" he asks after a pause during which I imagine him adjusting his pants. The thought makes me adjust mine.

"Oh, it's a blast." I keep my voice down, even though the parents are still watching their memories downstairs on the other side of the house. The study is unsettlingly quiet. "We're playing all kinds of Christmas games."

"Like Monopoly?"

"Like 'Get Wiley To Admit That Every Decision He's Made Since Leaving Home Has Been An Irreparable Disaster.' So far, I'm winning.

Two days 'til Christmas, though. It's still anybody's game."

"Even with your cousins there?"

"They cancelled. Someone had pox or fleas or... something, I didn't really get the whole story." Mom told me, I just didn't listen.

I hear him sigh. "My dad offered to get me a job with his friend Jake who runs a garage downtown."

This surprises me. "After your great season?"

"We lost in the quarters."

"I was there."

He chuckles, softly. "Mmm. No, they think I had a great senior season and they're trying to talk me out of joining the Arena League or going overseas."

"Right, because what parent wants their kid to play in an exotic foreign country?"

"For pennies on the UFL dollar?"

"And a garage is such a better use of your economics degree."

"It'd be in the front office. Accounting, books, stuff like that."

I curl up in the armchair and take a sip of water. "You're not really considering it?"

"No," he said. "I'm goin' to the UFL combine. And so are you."

"That's my tiger." I glance to the stairs. The home movies are still going strong. "I miss you," I say softy.

"Miss you too," he says.

No hesitation, so I know he's alone. "I miss your cock," I say, going back to the Lauren Bacollie.

"Lee!" The half-strangled exclamation is perfectly Dev, caught between what he wants and what he thinks is right.

"Really," I purr. "I'd love to feel it sliding up inside me right now. All big, and hard..."

"Lee, cut it out."

"I'm naked right now," I lie. "Think of it, my body pressed back against you, your cock deep inside..."

"I can't..."

"Lock the door," I suggest in my normal voice.

He sighs. "Hang on."

I grin, and slide my paw inside my pants.

Twenty very satisfying minutes later, I feel mellow enough to return to the Inquisition. The movie we have on now is our family trip to Lake Callahee. I've switched occupation from fireman to navigator, a proud nine-year-old cub trusted with the family map. This isn't my favorite trip, though. My favorite is the one four years later, when I managed to guide the family car to both the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame and the White Island Amusement Park, the latter having been expressly forbidden by my father. At nine, I'm still too proud at having control over the map to twist it to my own ends, but I can see the seeds of later rebellion in the intensity with which I study the map. And there's one moment, when Mother says into the microphone softy, "Look how hard he's trying to memorize the route," when I see the flick of my ears and I distinctly remember what I was thinking at that moment. I wasn't memorizing the route. I was nerving myself up to ask whether we could take a diversion to see the Boliat Boxers' practice facility, only an hour out of the way. I heard my mother's remark and squelched the question. A couple years later, I wouldn't be so timid. By the time I was fifteen, I'd lost my navigational privileges.

It's funny. I remember everything about that single moment: the smell of stale cookies in the car, my father's beer, my mother's scent mask back when she was still using sage, the peculiar tinting of the light hitting the map through the window, and even being thirsty for a Coke. But not two minutes later, I watch myself put the map down, and now I have no idea what I was thinking. The cub on the screen is watching trees go past, resting his muzzle on a skinny arm, lost in his own world, as he often was. And that world is lost to me.

"Were you talking to that Brian?" Mother doesn't look at me.

I curl my tail more tightly into my lap. "No."

"Are you going to talk to him?"

"I can handle my own business."

My father interrupts. "We've asked you several times to tell him to stop leaving messages for you here."

I sink further into the couch. "How many times has he called?"

"Not many," Mother says, as Father says, "Seven."

I close my eyes, trying not to imagine the snide messages. I wonder if he mentioned Dev in any of the messages. I wonder how I could possibly ask.

"I don't want him calling here any more," Father says.

I fold my ears back. "I don't know what I can do about it."

"All right," Father says. "If you need more incentive, here you go. If we get another message from him after the holidays, you won't be getting your monthly stipend."

That makes me sit up straight. "I told him. What do you want me to do, erase the number from his memory?"

"You're smart. You can figure something out."

"Why don't you meet a nice girl?" Mother inserts into the silence. "Don't tell me there aren't any nice vixens there at Forester."

"Only naughty ones," I say automatically, still stewing over the threat. "The nice ones go to Heaven." Something we kid about in my little circle within the Forester Lesbians And Gays.

"Don't be a smart-ass," Father says. For some reason, *that* set him off.

"Can't help it," I say, "it's how I was raised."

"I never raised you to talk back," he says.

"Monkey see, monkey do." The repartee is almost automatic for me, but it seems to throw him. I don't have a history of engaging him in this kind of back-and-forth, but I'm trying anything to delay the 'vixen' conversation.

"Maybe I should call Brian, then."

"Look," I say, pointing at the screen. "Isn't this where Father almost gets pulled into the water by that fish?"

Brian leaves two more messages the next day. I know because I check the answering machine when we get back from the movie ("A Christmas Parable," which we're obviously seeing to please Mother). I get as far as "I'm calling for Wiley" before I delete both messages. Mother, standing nearby, declares loudly that she's going to start dinner, and bustles off to the kitchen. Father doesn't look at me or say anything. But it seems clear that their gift to me of a new cell phone is at least somewhat related.

While Mother's prepping Christmas dinner, Father suggests a game of pool down in the game room. I agree, feeling generous. After he wins the first game, he says, "*Are* you seeing anyone?" All nonchalant, his ears up, tail neutral, but carefully avoiding looking at me.

I line up the balls for him and step away while he sets up the break. "I thought you didn't want to hear about that part of my life."

Snap! The balls scatter. He drops the 2. "I don't want to hear about

your mother's fur treatment appointments, either, but I listen to that and pay for it. At least your..." He pauses, sizing up the table, and moves to a clean shot on the 4. "... lifestyle doesn't cost me anything. Unlike your education."

"Nice break," I comment as he sinks the 4. "And nice shot."

"I just want to make sure you're being careful," he says, stepping in front of me. His tail nearly brushes my legs. I step back to give him room. "I gather you and Brian used to go out and now you don't. That bothers your mother. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"By 'hurt,' you mean 'sick,' right?" He drops the 6-ball, but it leaves him in a tough position now. He doesn't answer, so I go on. "Brian was my best friend. We never dated."

"You never brought your best friend home?"

I watch him make the 3. The cue ball doesn't quite roll far enough to make the easy shot on the 7. "We never managed to coordinate it."

"Does he not like football?" He's going to try for the 7 anyway. Tricky shot. He misses it.

I see my best shot and line up to drop the 12. "It's more like we disagreed on one specific aspect of football." I pocket the 12 and circle the table, looking for another opening. "What did he say?"

He watches me. "He seems worried about you."

"He doesn't know what he's talking about." I line up for the 14. He waits until I shoot. The ball crawls toward the hole and drops in with a thump. "I'll give him the cell phone number if you want. Then you won't have to talk to him."

"Wiley," Father says, backing out of my way as I set up the 10, "is this football player setting you up with drugs?"

I laugh, and lift the cue. "It's always drugs, isn't it?"

"So there is a football player."

"Yes," I say, and knock the 10 across the table, slamming it into the corner. "He's a cornerback for Forester and he's really good."

"Good at football, or good in general?"

I stop at that one and raise an eyebrow. My father flicks an ear. "Both," I say finally.

"All right," he says. "Your mother's already got her Grandparents Are For Spoiling mug. I'm not in any rush, myself." He points one claw at the table. "You've got a better shot on the 15."

About pool, he's always right. I line up the shot and drop it clean, and then of course the cue ball spins away into the side pocket.

I can already see from the lay of the table that he's got the game won. "That's what I get for taking your advice," I say lightly as he makes the first of his four shots. The 5 drops.

"It was good advice," he said. "You just went for too much." Thunk. The 1 is gone.

"How'm I ever going to learn, if I don't?"

He sinks the 6, bringing the cue ball back to rest six inches from the 8, clear space between it and the side pocket. "Side pocket," he says, and then, as he's lining it up, "I just don't know why you don't apply that to your career."

Tap. Thunk. Game over.

I get another, shorter, phone call with my tiger on Christmas Day itself, a nervous affair because both of our families are going to wonder what we're doing on the phone that day, but it's worth it to be able to exchange that, "Merry Christmas" and for just a moment share the special day. At least, it is for me, and it sounds like it is for him, too.

Less fun is the call with Brian. As much as I hate for Father's threat to force my actions, I can't really afford to lose the stipend. So I call, the day after Christmas Day. "Oh, hi, Tip," he says.

"Oh, hi, Brian," I reply.

"How's your Christmas been?" he asks, just as though everything is normal between us.

"Gee, it's been just swell. How is yours?"

"Are you spending it with him?"

"With whom?"

"You know who I mean. The football player."

"Which one? Fisher Kingston?"

He snorts. "You wish."

I look around. My parents are downstairs, well out of earshot. "Of course," I say. "He's sucking me off right now."

He makes a choked noise. "When are you going to wake up?"

I thought it would be fun to tease him, but I'm just tired of him. "Leave us alone."

"I'm telling you—"

"No, I'm telling you. If you want to get back at the football team, maybe you shouldn't have run off to the middle of nowhere. If you cared..."

I'm not sure what I was going to say. He jumps into the gap. "I wouldn't be calling if I didn't care about you."

"Save it for the audition," I say. "Look, stop calling my parents. And don't call my room. My parents gave me a cell phone."

"You're going to need someone to talk to one day."

"I'm not giving you the number."

"Tip—"

"Stop trying to pretend that you care!" I'm almost shouting into the phone. "Stop pretending you didn't just give up!"

He absorbs that for a moment. "Don't expect me to visit you in the hospital." He hangs up before I can respond.

I hang up the phone and just sit there until my mother calls up, "Wiley? Is everything okay?"

"Fine," I tell her, and I go downstairs. "I don't think Brian will be bothering you guys any more."

They don't ask any further, but they at least refrain from asking questions about my love life or career that evening. I badly want to call Dev, just to hear his voice, but I know he's busy with his own family stuff. And we'll be back at school in another week.

Whether from the pre-Christmas tension or from the phone call with Brian, my parents lay off for the rest of the week and let me have time to myself. I call Dev twice more, but don't get through, so by the time I'm back in my old apartment, I can't keep my paws or tail still from the anticipation of seeing him again. I'm already aching hard by the time he walks through my door. Judging by the speed with which our clothes hit the floor, he feels the same way.

"What were you doing on Christmas, when I called you?" I ask him, afterwards.

He trails his claws through the fur on my chest, down to my stomach, tail draped proprietarily over my hip. "Watching a movie."

"A Christmas Story?"

"The Ten Commandments."

"Yikes."

He chuckles, the soft whuff of breath tickling my whiskers. He smells

of my shampoo, but his breath is meaty from his dinner. "It's a family tradition. Though with that new nativity movie coming out, I bet we'll switch to that."

"A Christmas Parable"? We saw that." My eyes want to drift shut, but I force them open, to keep drinking in the sight of him. "Don't want to go to class tomorrow."

"What are you taking?"

I rattle off the classes: a senior English thesis, an 18th century lit review, a creative writing class, and a movie class I'm taking to fill out the time. "Should be no sweat to get through them to graduate. The senior thesis is gonna be easy once I decide what to do. Only the lit review is kind of a pain. Eighteenth century authors, ugh. At least Oliver Goldsmith is kind of amusing. You're just taking that economic theory application seminar, right?"

"Economic Theory Application to City Planning, yeah, and, um," his ears flick, "21st Century Gender Studies."

I can't help giggling. "What?"

He pokes my stomach. "I needed one more credit, and it was a Tuesday-Thursday like the other one."

"That was the only Tuesday-Thursday seminar?" I giggle more the more he pokes me.

"I needed to keep my four-day weekends," he says, "to practice for the combine."

I sigh. "Weren't you supposed to have heard by now? It's only a month and a half away."

"I got a call from an agent," he says. "Rod something."

"They can't even wait 'til you get your official invitation? Damn sharks."

"I think he said he's a bobcat," Dev says, but I see the twitch to his whiskers.

"Wait a minute." I push my nose right up against his. "You already got your invitation!" The grin spreads across his muzzle. "Oh, you..." I reach out to tickle him, but he takes my paws and rolls over on top of me, pinning me.

"I got the letter after you called, the day after Christmas," he says, pressing me down into the bed, eyes sparkling. "I wanted to see how long I could keep it secret."

I squirm under him, grinning back. "You're going to the combine!" He purrs, and looks smug. "So are you." "Oh, yeah." My ears perk up. "I should call Morty." He noses down my muzzle, to my throat. "Right now?" I shiver. "No," I breathe. "Not right now."

I can't watch Dev's practices, of course. Coach is excited enough to have a kid going to the combine that he sets up personal sessions and calls in favors from some D-I friends of his. I hang around one of the practices — in my regular clothes, not my drag outfit — but I stand out because there's nobody else watching. Eventually the coach yells at me to get out. Dev doesn't look at me as I slink away.

So I take to scouring the Internet for stats and video of the top players at his position and giving him tips over lunch, dinner, and sex. I like watching his reaction when I'm teasing him, holding his hardness in my paw. He'll be starting to get all worked up, and I'll say something like, "Control your breathing, you need to work on your stamina." Usually he takes a moment to process that, and then he glares at me and says something about keeping my mind on what I'm doing, and I ask him if that means he thinks I need practice, and we go on, with a little more heat.

These are good days, all bright and full of expectation, even though Dev gets more and more worried as the weekend draws closer. He has now gotten several official letters from the UFL about the schedule and policies and strict behavior guidelines. It's not that he thinks he won't be able to follow them; he's worried about what the other guys will do. I'm not talking the obvious ones like "no guns allowed," I'm talking the ones like "no interfering with other players' interviews." Dev asks why they would need to spell that out, and I tell him that these guys will do anything to get an UFL contract. By his delayed response, I see him wondering how far *he* would go.

It's the week before the combine when we have that conversation, walking through the campus mall side by side, just like two pals talking about the future. He's got that behavior policy letter crumpled in one fist, jammed into his pocket, while I have my paws clasped behind my back, tail swinging demurely behind me. Other students mill around us, which would've bothered Dev once upon a time. "Don't worry about it," I tell him. "Just be aware all the time."

"I'm going to be worrying about football."

"Football is 50% mental. Look at it this way: usually when you line up for drills, you have to figure out what the opposing team is doing. Well, the athletic part this time is easy, it's all laid out for you. What you need to figure out is what every other guy in your position is doing, and do it better."

"Great," he says sourly. "I'll just do that, then."

"I'll be there to help," I shoot at him. Morty remembered me. He wants to get together the night before Dev's scheduled to arrive, to talk about how I'm going to help him out. "I'm gonna be learning to be a scout."

"You don't scout what other prospects do behind closed doors."

I grin until he looks at me. "C'mon," I say. "This is me, remember?"

"What does that mean, doc?"

He's anxious and frustrated already, and I'm half-deliberately goading him. "My blessed parents instilled in me the gift of gab, and I have been honing it lo these many years at this august institution," I say. "If there is a snippet of information at the combine that might be of a help to my favorite cornerback, do you think I'll stop until I've nosed it out of its hiding place, however reclusive?"

He shakes his head, and then his expression gets all serious, the way it does when he has an idea. "Would you..."

"How far would I go?" I slip into my husky voice. "How far do you think, stud?"

"Don't," he says.

I stay in character. "Even if it means the difference between an UFL contract and a job at your father's garage?"

He looks straight ahead of him. "Just don't," he says.

It's a nice moment, that jealousy in his expression. "I can't tell what I might have to do," I say.

"Lee," he says, "you might get hurt."

That shuts me up, and good. Damn him for coming up with just the right thing to say to turn my little game of making him jealous into something more serious. I wait a few for the warmth and lump in my throat to subside, as we walk on under the rustling of the leaves in the trees, and then I say, in my normal voice, "Where you want to go for dinner? Mitchell Hall, or the Goose?"

We have variants on this conversation a few times over the next week,

Dev worrying about his athletic performance (and getting increasingly picky about what he eats) and his interview performance, and me trying to coach him on the latter and reassure him on the former. From what I can see, he'll do fine as long as he stays honest and doesn't try to blow them away with something he's not prepared to do. His times are good for his position—not great, but good enough, and combined with his smarts, there's no reason he can't play professionally. Except that he's not sure he can.

I spend the last night before we leave with Dev, trying to take his mind off the impending poking, prodding, measuring, and questioning he's going to endure. Of course, I do this in my own vulpine way.

"Six point eight... come on, you can get to seven, I know you can." I'm pressing a ruler against his erection while my paw teases his balls. He growls and pants, trying not to laugh or swat me. "You think Shamus Livingston settled for six point eight? You think Seito's going to settle for six point eight?"

"He's a wolf," Dev growls, pushing his hips against the ruler as if that will help.

"Six point nine..."

He sits up on the bed then and grabs the ruler from me. "Give me that." He places it against himself, sees that he's well past seven, and glares at me.

I give him a sweet smile. "You were so cute, I didn't want you to stop."

"I'll give you something to stop," he growls, pinning me down to the bed.

My paw flails at the bedside table. "Wait, wait!" He pauses, nose inches from mine. "What?"

I grin and hold up the stopwatch. "We need to see if you can improve on your time."

A moment later, the stopwatch is lying against the wall, I'm lying on my stomach, and all seven inches are jammed under my tail, thrusting back and forth as I give some theatrical yelps (the surprise is fake, the pleasure isn't). Dev's purr-growls get louder and the exquisite tightness of his muscles holds me like iron wrapped in velvet. His immense paws grip my chest, claws out just enough to tickle skin through my thick chest ruff.

With a throaty growl, his paws and body tighten. I know him as well as myself now, bracing myself back against him for the slam of climax into me, winding my tail around his hips as far as it'll go. And it comes right on schedule, that passionate flurry of motion, and in this position, the passion and thrusting are almost enough to get me off even without the help of his paw, which comes a moment later.

Panting, he lies on top of me, forcing me down into the sticky pool I just created. Panting, I'm too warm and gooey to complain. It's a little power game he likes from time to time, and I have to say that I don't mind it terribly. Not when he's nuzzling my ears and chewing on my neck ruff and making all those nice little noises, and squirming in a delightful way under my tail.

Eventually, sadly, we have to get up and shower. But it's not long before we're curled up together again, for the last night in a while. At least, I'm thinking that even if he isn't. And I'm sure he isn't, because he seems very distracted as I spoon back against him, pulling his arm over my chest. "Dev," I say. He responds the second time I say it.

"Hm?"

I wriggle back against him. "If you have trouble with the managers and scouts when they interview you, just picture them naked."

For a second, he doesn't know if I'm serious. Then his arm tightens around me and he chuckles. "Okay."

I'm almost asleep when he says, "Wait. You want me to picture other guys naked?"

It's my turn to chuckle. I nuzzle his arm and don't reply.

One of the issues with going to the combine, for me, is skipping classes. I haven't made a habit of it in three and a half years at Forester, but this semester, with Dev's workouts and the excitement of the draft, I've slipped a bit from my lofty standards. It's not a big deal for a couple of the classes, but it does prickle my fur if I think about it too much. I'd like to not think about it at all, but I have to keep dodging questions from my TA about the lit review. I tell him I've got a family thing this week and won't be in class (ignoring the extra flush at the back of my neck that comes with the thought of using my parents as an excuse to ditch), but I promise to read *Charlotte Temple* and be ready for next week's session. He asks me to do a writeup on the themes we're discussing this week, if I'm going to miss

the class. We both know that's just busy work, but what the hell, he's letting me miss a participation-graded class, so I agree to do it. To my parents, I don't say anything. They'll call my cell, I'll answer bland questions about my classes. Hopefully they won't call in the middle of an interview, or a tryout, or something.

I've only been to Boliat once before, the "city on the edge of a thousand cornfields," my father called it. That's about how many I count on the drive down. When we came here as a family, it was a stop on the way to our relatives out east in Port City. We stayed at a Quality Rest on the freeway and never saw the city itself. This time, I navigate through decaying factories and weed-infested industrial parks, following Morty's directions to a bar named Kelly's. It turns out to be exactly the sort of place you would expect on the outskirts of downtown Boliat, outside and in: faded sign, old neon, Boliat Boxers pennants in the window, wood as old as the Hilltown Bricklayers, graffiti carved into every post, dimly lit, reeking of stale booze and stale people. The bartender, a gruff old polecat, checks my ID twice and sniffs it three times before pouring me a beer. I take a seat at a table that's canted so far to one side that I can't let go of my beer, and keep an eye on the door.

Morty slouches in a few minutes late, with a "hey, Kelly," to the polecat and a wave to a raccoon at the bar. He's wearing a nice brown sport coat with matching pants over which his ropelike tail waves lazily. Not in bad shape, and lucky enough to be a cougar, so his gut doesn't look as bad on him as it would, say, on me (not like *that*). He gets his beer and casts around the room before noticing me. He squints; I nod.

"Wasn't sure I'd remember what'cha look like," he says, approaching the table. "Didn't have to."

"Only fox in the place," I agree. We shake paws. His is heavy, hammy, squeezing too tightly and then letting go fast. "Good to see you again."

"Same here," he says without meaning it. He takes a drink of his beer as he sits. "Shit, it's been a long day already. Four more to go. So, you wanna be a scout."

"Seems as good a thing to do as any."

He shrugs. "It's a life. Lots of travel, late nights. You gotta love it."

And he does. I can see that in the shine of his eyes that he tries to hide behind his cougar's sneer of cynicism. "I love breaking down the games," I tell him. "And I like talking to the players."

"You don't do much of that," he says. "Just the prospects. Just places I like this. And there's not much to like."

"Why not?"

"Because," he points a stubby finger at me, "you tell a team to pick the wrong kid, you could lose your job. I got fired from Freestone because I told them to take Jerry Taga over Mick Collinsworth."

"I thought Collinsworth was like a sixth round pick."

Morty nods. "He was. Peco swooped in on Collinsworth when we passed. Taga came to practice and folded like a rabbit at a poker table." He looks around the bar, maybe looking for rabbits. "Collinsworth was starting by week eight. That's when Sam Bishop calls me into his office and says they're cutting back on the scouting team."

"For a sixth-round pick?"

"Big mistake. Then again, I told the Dragons to pass on Shamus Livingston, and I'm still workin' for them."

"Really?" Livingston set a record for tackles by a rookie last year.

"Yeah. He seemed bored." He gulps another drink and then grins. "Ah, it ain't as bad as I make it out to be, kid," he says. "There was other stuff going on at Freestone. This place is like a big dysfunctional family. You get fired from one gig, there's another waiting."

"Dysfunctional families I know," I tell him.

He grins. "You'll fit right in. So tell me 'bout yourself."

I spend twenty minutes on my carefully rehearsed bio, and at the end of it he nods, but doesn't look as impressed as I'd hoped. "So you've been around football a long time."

I nod. "Went to Hilltown's one playoff game in '94."

"We'll get back there." I'm inclined to discount that as his automatic reply except that he drifts off a bit after saying it, staring into a dark corner of the bar, and I can see the gears in his mind turn as he adds up the talent on the team and the possibilities, probably next year's schedule (which isn't out yet). And that excites me.

"We will," I say, "if Thallow and Vinge can step up this year, if TGV can protect the blind side as well as he did last year, and if we can draft a couple rookies who can fill the gaps at tackle and end on the left side."

A flicker of surprise lights in his eyes as he turns back to me, his ears perking slightly. "You know what?" I shake my head. "You remind me of me, like twenty years ago."

"With a longer nose."

"More spindly, too." He taps the table, head tilted, watching me. "I had a whole speech about scouting ready to give ya, warning you off, but that wouldn't really matter, would it? I could say you have to bend over and get fucked up the ass every night and you'd still want the job."

I just nod, because if I say anything, it'll be "even more so," or, "I'm counting on it," and I don't think I want to go down that path with Morty just yet. He finishes off his beer and signals for another one.

"Come get it yourself," the polecat yells at him.

Morty snorts and goes over to the bar. When he returns with his beer, he extends a paw to me again. "Well, kid, if you think you can find us a left tackle and left end, welcome aboard. I'm not authorized to hire full time, but I already talked to the club about working with an assistant as a temp. Sign some paperwork tomorrow morning, then we'll hit the first round of workouts, wideouts doing the forty. Hope you're a quick learner, 'cause after that you go to interviews yourself while I watch the second round of wideouts. I'll get you the schedule tomorrow morning when you come by to sign the paperwork."

"Interviews myself?" My tail's twitching, excited.

"Don't worry. Media interviews, mostly bullshit. Nobody asks good questions, kids all give coached answers. Just one of those things we gotta cover." He scribbles a hotel and room number on a bar napkin and slides it across the table to me. His extended claws tear the edge as I take it. "Where you staying?"

Dev's at the Hyatt adjoining the convention center. We didn't think it was discreet for me to stay there too. Not to mention it's about three hundred a night. "Motel 6, down the road that way, take a right at the crack house and a left at the abandoned factory and you're there."

He grins. "One perk of this job is I get to stay downtown where the action is. But I used to stay out there, back in the day. Fact, I think I usedta stay in that crack house."

I'm glad he can make jokes that don't involve minorities. "So how long have you been doing this?" I ask.

He stares down into his beer. "Twenty-two years ago was my first combine. Eighty-four." He rattles off a list of Hall of Famers he talked to, and then pauses and says, "Bennie Ringer."

I frown. "Never heard of him."

"Course you haven't. He was my first twister." He watches my ears cant and my frown deepen. "Twister. Left twisting, last leaf on the tree or some bullshit like that. It's what Mike called 'em, and I learned from him. A twister is a kid who's got spirit, got talent, but just for one reason or another never gets drafted, never makes a team. You know in your gut he's got what it takes, but it don't show up on film, and you just can't talk the bosses into taking a chance on him. Used to be the twisters'd just disappear. You might run into 'em later bagging groceries the next year. Now, with the internet and European football and arena and that shit, they never vanish. You keep checkin' up on 'em. Sometimes they even make it to the league after a couple years and you think, there, see, I was right."

Now he gulps the beer. "Is there a twister every year?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "At least one."

I go quiet, thinking about how talent isn't all it takes to get a break, in this or any profession. Morty talks a little more about the old days, shows me his Pocket PC with all the players in it and the form he got off a friend of his that lets him scribble notes in shorthand. "I still use the clipboard for games," he says, "for the big diagram of the field. But for the combine, this is amazing. I usedta have to carry a huge binder full of paper in a briefcase everywhere. Now I just carry this and a couple memory cards. I love technology."

So do I — sometimes. Dev's supposed to message me when he gets to the hotel, and the phone in my pocket hasn't gone off yet. I'm not worried, but I'm starting to wonder if I should be. Even when Morty and I finally shake paws and separate for the night — "last good night of sleep you'll get for a few days," he says — Dev still hasn't texted. I hold the phone in my paw on the way home, wondering if I should bother him or not, and finally I send him a quick text: ARV OK?

All that does is exacerbate my sense of loneliness as I try to judge whether the sirens in the distance are heading this way or not, picking my way around broken glass in the street. The only other person in sight is a shambling bear, lurching against the houses on the other sidewalk. I think about him and wonder if he's a twister, too, someone who once had talent and promise that didn't show up on film, or if he just had some bad breaks.

I know that feeling sorry for him, and myself, isn't productive, but it's a quiet street and a lonely moon, and the mood is impossible to dispel. Getting to my motel helps a bit, but not much; despite the cozy light and

trappings, the room smells worse than I remember it. The water comes out of the sink with a brownish tinge and a coppery taste, and when I sit on the bed, I feel the unmistakable tickle of fleas.

So I put my clothes back on and go out to the manager's office, where I ask for flea spray and he tells me he's out (of course he is), but that the maids have some and he promises to make a note to instruct them specifically to use it in my room tomorrow morning, and unfortunately all the other rooms are taken and he'd really like to help but he's tired and it's late and I'm only paying twenty bucks a night, after all. He doesn't say this last, but he doesn't have to.

I trudge back to the room and lie down on the floor. I try to read *Charlotte Temple*, but good Lord above, it's boring. Just as I close my eyes, my phone buzzes. I grab it and flip it open and see a message from Dev: GOT HERE OK. WHOS ARV? I smile, hold the phone against my chest, and try to get to sleep.

Despite a stiff shoulder from sleeping on the floor, I'm in good shape for the following day. Signing the papers with Morty takes only a few minutes, as long as it takes for me to scan the legalese and make sure I'm not signing away anything important (they basically just say that I'm working for the Dragons on an unpaid internship for one month and that I promise not to reveal anything I learn to anyone not working for the Dragons). After that, we drink hotel coffee and he brings out his list of prospects, which he was nice enough to print out for my PDA-less paws.

This list, I have to say, is pretty cool. This is everyone the Dragons are looking at, which is more or less all three hundred people in the camp. I scan it for Dev's name, trying not to look like that's what I'm doing, and find him near the bottom, incorrectly listed as a defensive end. I think about correcting Morty, decide that wouldn't be the best course of action in my first hour of employment, and just cup my big ears forward to listen.

After going through the schedule again, we head off to the first workout and watch all the kids practice from the clump of scouts. I get a lot of ribbing from the others because of my age, things like, "why aren't you out there?" and "Morty, your kid don't look like you, 'dja notice?" and "whassa matter, kid, bomb out already?" But for the most part, they're focused on the workouts and so am I.

It's hard to keep it professional. Here are over thirty kids my age, twenty to twenty-two, superb athletes of every species—and wearing fairly

tight-fitting clothing, even though the furbearers still have their full winter coats. I see the fittest raccoon I've ever seen, who could be a superstar on some of the web sites I visit; a coyote with legs as thick as my waist who's had himself molted and then had his fur sculpted, so his muscles practically pop out; and a cheetah whose lines blur even when he's standing still. And that's just the group right in front of us. Everywhere I look, gorgeous boys flexing, running, posing, performing.

My tiger's not in this group, more the pity, as it'd give me something to focus on without feeling guilty about the throbbing stiffness in my pants. I have to keep holding my list in front of my crotch, like I haven't had to do since high school, willing it to go down and cursing my decision to wear jeans rather than looser slacks. Unfortunately, in order to do this job, I have to refer to the list almost constantly, and make notes on it, so I strain my neck looking down. It'd be easier if there were somewhere to sit, but we're walking around, trying to stay as close to the action as allowed.

To my relief, by the time Morty comes to collect me for the interviews, I no longer look like a horny high school kid. Only the top fifty players or so get media interviews, and those are scattered throughout the combine. There are twenty-three the Dragons think they might be interested in, twelve of which they will have a reasonable chance of getting as things stand now, but with trades and all, you never know, so Morty, Vic (the other Dragons scout), and I will have to cover all twenty-three. The general manager and director of player personnel and coaching staff will be focusing on the workouts and will set up evening interviews with the players they have specific interest in. Those have a big impact on drafting decisions. The scouts usually don't attend those.

So while those are going on, Morty takes me and Vic to dinner at a pizza joint down the road. The day's been a blur to me; I constantly have to refer to my notes to remember some of the things I wanted to talk about. I haven't had a chance to call Dev all day, but that's okay, because he's probably busy with meetings and medical exams and psych testing and stuff. I don't know if any teams set up interviews with him besides the Dragons.

I seem to have done pretty well for my first day. Morty gives me a handful of interviews to attend the following day, mostly the players they don't think they'll get. Like Morty told me, and tells me again, the interviews are the dead weight of the combine. They're held for the benefit

of the media, but it's nice for the scouts to have someone there. In rare cases, they might learn something from the answer to a question, and the transcripts of the interviews aren't really that reliable. I read through them, back in my hotel room, and then call Dev.

He doesn't answer the phone. I leave my stinky room and pace around under the stars for a little while, and then decide I should get some sleep, because tomorrow's going to be even more tiring than today. And as I settle back onto the floor (the maid service has not really done anything to take care of the flea problem, other than adding the sharp chemical scent of the flea spray to the odors of the room), my phone rings.

"This is amazing!" he gushes. "I was hanging out with all these guys and we were joking about the hospital tests. I think I'm the heaviest in the group."

His excitement makes my tail wag. "Of course. There aren't many tigers who can cover a wideout."

"I'm the only tiger. There's one cougar, and otherwise it's like a dozen foxes and some coyotes and a couple wolves."

"Foxes?"

He lowers his voice. "None of them looks as good as you."

"Now I know you're lying. I saw the wideouts practicing today."

"Sure, they have muscles, if you go for that sort of thing."

I grin. "Maybe I should start working out."

He snorts. "How was your day?"

I tell him, but briefly, because I want to hear more of his experiences. "Did any other teams set up interviews with you?"

"Two," he says. "Gateway and Highbourne."

I try to think about what I know about those teams, but my head is full of numbers and workouts from today. "Cool," I say. "Will there be any more, or is that it?"

"Hellentown said they might come by if they had time."

"Nice!" It really is, even though I can't get Morty's talk about the 'twister' out of my head. If I can help it, that won't be Dev. He's talented enough to make it, I think, though after the morning spent watching the sleek physical specimens he's up against, I have nagging doubts. I also have something else. "So, think I can come over now?" I say, rubbing my erection, even though I'd been about to get to sleep.

"Oh, I dunno, Lee, I have to be up pretty early tomorrow. Maybe

tomorrow night?"

I move my paw back to behind my head and stare at the ceiling and sigh. This is more important than me getting off tonight. Besides, I've always got my paw at the ready if things get too tense. "Sure."

"I want it too," he says.

I cut him off with, "I know, but this is your career. I can wait 'til tomorrow."

"Will you?"

"Sure," I say, and then get what he means. My paw, which had drifted back down to my sheath, lifts away from it. "Yeah, I'll wait." He chuckles.

"Me too."

"Do you have to get naked with a bunch of foxes again tomorrow?"

"I didn't check the schedule." I can't tell whether he's responding seriously to my question or not, not while over the phone. Another reason to wish I were there in person: it's a lot easier to tease him.

"Well, if you do, you can tell me about it tomorrow night."

"I will." He rumbles. "In detail."

Now I know he's joking.

The following day I'm even more stiff from sleeping on the floor again, not to mention in a different way from watching more trim, fit, muscular boys go through their paces.

I'm starting to get a feel for it, after just one day, I think. It's a lot easier when you see a bunch of workouts back to back, and you can see the kids who have a real enthusiasm for the game. Watching the offensive line is as different from watching the position players as night and day. Yesterday it was all about fleet agility, speed and coordination. Today it's about brute strength and, yes, speed, but a different kind of speed. It takes the linemen a lot longer to stop when they've done the 40, like a fleet of trucks applying the brakes as safely as possible. Because, of course, on the field, what will stop them will be another truck.

Their job is to stop the monsters across the line from getting to their quarterback, and to open up holes in the line for the runners to get through, so here we want bulk and agility. There are bears and boars, an elk and two rhinos, and a massive cougar. I want to take the cougar aside and tell him to switch positions, because he's clearly over-bulked up in an attempt to compensate for his lack of weight. He'd be better on the defensive line with

the wolves, tigers, and other cougars. He runs with a dispirited desperation, as though he knows he's not as good as the rest of them but doesn't believe he ever will be. He's bigger than Dev, but not nearly as fluid or enthusiastic as my tiger, who will be working out tomorrow.

The interviews I do on my own are as boring as Morty promised. I scribble down a couple questions I'd like to ask some of these kids, and make notes on temperament when I think it's appropriate. What I learn from the interviews is that every college coach is the best in the country, that every program is chock-full of quality teammates, that next year's rookies are going to be the most humble, thankful group of pro football players I've ever seen, and that heaven is full of supportive relatives looking down on this rookie class and watching out for them. One wolf (Jarbo Kinnic, from way up north, a second-rounder probably) has apparently been told that he needed a dead relative, because he tells a tearful story about how his great-aunt had lifted him up when he was born and told his mother that his speed would bring great fortune to the family, but she died before she ever got to see him play football. The reporters nearest me don't even bother to make more than a cursory note on that one, preferring instead to discuss the quality of the local escort service.

It's at that interview that I see my first agent. At least, the first agent identified as such. I take him for a combine official at first, his fur is so sleek and his suit so neatly pressed. But one of the reporters in front of me catches sight of the rabbit accosting the wolf after the interview, putting his arm around the kid's shoulder in a way no official ever would. "Slime," the reporter says, the wolf next to him nods, and they go off together leaving me watching the rabbit lead Kinnic out through the dark doorway that leads back to the hotel. All I can think about is whether Dev is on any agent's radar.

Morty and Vic recognize the agent, not one with whom the Dragons have a good relationship. But Kinnic isn't high on our list anyway. Morty reckons that if he's getting interest, some of the ones we do want might be falling lower, so he and Vic both make a point to review their notes and make a recommendation to the team. The debriefing, again, is so thorough that I feel someone's scrubbed out my head. I can barely recall the taste of my pizza. But when it's over, I fairly bounce out of the restaurant and to Dev's hotel.

I call him from the lobby and say, "Is this the famous Devlin Miski? I

believe I have a personal interview scheduled for tonight. I'm very anxious to see how you'll fit in my scheme. I have a hole to fill that I think you'll be perfect for."

He makes a strangled noise. "I'm sorry," he says, "I've got another interview going on now. Tomorrow night okay?"

All the energy drains out of me. Yes, even down there. I slump against the wall. It's his career, I remind myself. "Yes, of course. I'll call you then."

"Thanks," he says, and I hear him talking to someone else as he hangs up.

The hotel has a bar and a nice restaurant. I resist the temptation to get a beer, because I know one beer will lead to three, and three will lead to me depressed, and I don't want that. I mean, I don't want it to get worse. So I catch a table at the hotel restaurant and order the unhealthiest dessert on the menu, a piece of cheesecake with chocolate strawberry topping, and I ask for extra whipped cream. It makes me feel a little better, good enough to walk back to my flea-infested stinkpit of a room and my cozy piece of floor.

Watching Dev work out on the next day almost makes up for it. There he is, a half-foot taller than most of the foxes and coyotes who traditionally go out for the defensive back position. This position plays to do two things: break up or intercept passes, and tackle runners downfield. The three most important aspects of this position are speed, vision, and decisiveness. And then speed, a couple more times. So there's not much interest in how much this group can bench, but everybody's eagerly watching as they line up in heats to do the 40.

Dev's not going to do well against the foxes, specifically. We might have been bred to play this position. Quick, agile, and predatory, the best DBs have always been foxes. The coyotes running for this position are the lighter specimens; heavier yotes with more developed legs will go for wideout, where all they have to do is run fast, learn to run routes, and grab the ball when it's near them, and where their extra bulk is useful to block when the play isn't going to them. But the top five prospects at this position, the kids who are going to go in the first three rounds of the draft, are all foxes.

Besides Dev, there are a few other species: a white-tailed deer, who just might have a shot at it, two small, light bobcats, a cougar, and a skunk. The only reason I can think of for the skunk to be there is that maybe his

scent distracts wideouts enough to disrupt plays, but when I check the Dragons' list, I find that he's actually ahead of Dev. Huh.

He sees me watching him. I flick an ear; he stares and then the corner of his mouth quirks up, and he goes back to warming up for the run. He turns in a pretty good time. The foxes dominate the top of the board, with Milt Russell, the top prospect, blazing through with a 4.21 (that's good). Dev is a half-second slower, 4.75, good enough for the middle of the pack. The skunk is faster than I would have thought, running at 4.5. Just proof that you can't always judge by species.

Digression: there's a lot of debate over how much a half-second matters, let alone hundredths of a second. Isn't field awareness and smarts better than a half-second more of speed? Well, yes and no. In practice, that half-second could break up one more play a game, one ball you just get your fingertips on and alter the path of, one tackle you make by your shoestrings. More importantly, there's no way to measure field awareness with a stopwatch. Morty assures me that the 40 is just one factor in the team's decision, but there's no question it's an important one. For Dev, I know that 4.75 is close to his personal best. I'd hoped he could crank it up a little more, but at least he didn't really do himself any damage. I give him a little wave as he heads off the field and get a nice warm feeling when I get a wave back.

After that, Morty drags me along to a press interview with a guy the Dragons are strongly considering, a tough wolf who played tackle for Ocean State. The team's only concern, according to Morty, is a correctable one: his footwork needs a little improvement on the left side. I saw him work out, and my impression is that he's one of those talented guys who's so used to being the best that he never adjusts to having to work hard to maintain his edge. Yeah, okay, I get this from maybe five minutes watching, but because he was on my list and marked, I also stayed close and listened to him talk. He called the rest of the guys "punks" and even said he was better than most current players. Which even from five minutes I could tell he wasn't.

So we're sitting there in the press room, and I'm listening to this blowhard go on about how much he's looking forward to playing in the pros, and yes, of course his grandfather inspired him to play football and he wishes he could be here today to see this proud moment. "He's got no sense of perspective," I say to Morty, who looks as bored as I am. "I mean,

ask him what Hall of Fame tackle he compares himself to. Bet he can't even name one."

His ears stand up straighten. He looks up at the wolf thoughtfully. "Aren't that many in the Hall," he says.

Just then, the reporter in front of us raises his paw. "What player would you say your style most resembles?" he asks.

Morty and I both stare at him. He's a wolf himself, rangy and tall, and obviously with excellent hearing. I hadn't even noticed his ears swept back.

The kid preens a bit, then comes back with the names of two well-known tackles currently playing who get a lot of press. They probably won't even get considered for the Hall. Though, as Morty observed, that pretty much goes without saying when you play that position.

I get a more appraising look from Morty after that, and it might just be my imagination, but that answer doesn't seem to go over well with the reporters in the room. The questions become chillier and more cursory, even if the wolf—the kid, I mean—is too full of himself to notice.

"Nice question, kid," the wolf reporter in front of us says when the interview is over and everyone's stretching, waiting for the next one.

"He didn't do too well at it, did he?" I say.

Morty chuckles. "You noticed that, didja?" I nod. "Most of the guys, like Tripski here," he waves a paw in the wolf's direction, and the wolf dips his muzzle, "are old-school, like to see a sense of history. The kid had attitude, and that's okay, but you gotta have respect for history too."

"Got that right," Tripski says. "Not like it matters. He's got freakish speed, someone's gonna take a chance on him." He squints at Morty. "Thinkin' I've got a good idea who."

Morty swats me on the shoulder with the rolled-up combine program. "C'mon, Lee," he says, "let's get ready for the next one."

My seemingly-innocent question is the major topic over dinner. Vic is impressed, and taps me on the shoulder a couple times. "You mighta cost him a few mil," he says, more than once, but Morty doesn't seem as convinced.

"That's for the team to decide," he says, but I note that he's made a couple marks next to the wolf's name on his list.

We're there two and a half hours and three rounds of beer, distilling information, trying to remember every nuance of everything we saw some kid do or not to. It's exhausting, but at the same time I don't want it to end.

"You don't look tired," Morty says to me a little after eight. "You still into this?"

Vic's got his head in his paws. "I'm wiped. One more beer and I'm ready to call it quits."

I flick my ears. "It's just, when this is over, that's it. I go back to school and *Charlotte Temple*"

"Didn't know you were Jewish." I can't tell whether Morty's serious or not.

"That one of your professors?" Vic asks, with a glance at the cougar.

I shake my head. "It's this, uh, really dull 18th century novel about... well, I'm not really sure what it's about yet. It's for one of my college classes." I take another drink. "This stuff is so much more interesting." Sure, I'm playing it up a bit for them. I love English, and *Charlotte Temple* is a really well-written book. Honest.

"Well," Vic says, "got to pass your classes, right?"

"Yeah." I almost make a comment about my parents. Almost.

"Hey," Morty says, "how about we wrap this up and get that last beer over at Kelly's?"

"Sure," Vic says, and I agree to tag along. I know Dev's waiting, but part of me wants to make him wait a little longer. More than that, though, it's trying to hold on to this company, feeling like I'm part of the whole football scene with these guys who respect what I can do and what I know. That makes me feel warm inside. Or maybe that's just the beer.

When we get to Kelly's, Morty buys the first round, something imported, which is a bit of a surprise. We all toast. "To another combine in the books," Morty says.

"Amen." Vic and I gulp the beer. After the stuff from the brew pub, it tastes a bit canned, but I'm not gonna complain as long as Morty's buying.

Vic raises his mug next. "And to Lee," he says. "You been a big help this time round."

"Thanks." My ears flick. I can't help smiling. "You guys are fun to work with."

We all drink, and then Morty and Vic look at each other. Morty grins. "Vic and I been talking," he says. "How'd you like to stick around with the club for a while, watch some film with us?"

I stare at him, then turn to Vic. I want to pinch myself. "Combine's always hell," Vic says. "You handled it real good."

Morty nods. "Now, it'd just be an internship until the draft in April. After that we'd consider bringing you on as a full time scout. You think it's crazy now, wait 'til colleges start practicing in the summer."

I squeeze my beer mug. My tail wants to lash back and forth like crazy. "Uh, so, what's the internship pay?" As soon as I say that, I curse my father for putting those thoughts in my head. It's a job with the Dragons. Who cares what it pays?

Morty and Vic exchange a look. "Well," the cougar says slowly, "I'll see what I can get out of the club. So what'cha think?"

I'm grinning fit to burst. "I had a blast," I say. "Hell, yes."

It's only two beers later that it occurs to me to wonder what effect that will have on my school schedule. One more beer postpones that worry for later. Two more and I insist I have to be off to bed, which is true; I just haven't said whose.

By this time, I know the lobby of Dev's hotel pretty well, and I decide to surprise him. The combine's over, for all intents and purposes, and all he's gonna be doing is packing up to go home tomorrow. It won't really be a surprise, because he's expecting me, but I don't even want to wait long enough for a phone call. I'm so excited it takes me three tries to hit the right button for his floor, and when I finally get there, the lighting in the hall is all weird and I have to get right up close to the numbers on the doors to see them properly. But finally I locate 517 and knock.

He answers the door in a suit and tie, two hundred plus pounds of muscles packed into sartorial elegance, a sight that makes me kind of dizzy. "Lee?" he says as I stumble into the room and rub a paw down his shirt. The door swings shut behind me with a slam.

"You didn't h-have to dresh up for m-me," I say. Damn. Better not talk so much. I may be a little bit drunk.

"Listen," he says, "can you..."

"You look great." I take care, enunciating each word. "I have missed you."

"I missed you too," he says. "Lee..."

My paw has already found his crotch. "I missed this."

He moans, reacting immediately to my touch. He's also kind of trying to push me away, but I'm not in the mood for our little games. I want what's in my paw, and I know what will stop his playful resistance.

Slipping under the range of his paws, I drop to my knees and focus

hard on my fingers. Fortunately, his zipper is pretty loose and it comes down easily. "Lee..." he says again, panting hard.

My paw slides into his loose slacks and through his boxers, finding his big, warm hardness and squeezing. I pull it free and slide my tongue up it. "Mmm?" I say, tilting my muzzle up with a smile. Finally I feel on solid ground, literally and figuratively. On my knees, I'm much less wobbly, and I know where the next few minutes are going to go. Even slightly drunk, I can still suck cock. And if I weren't drunk, I'd probably go into some philosophical aside about how being good at cocksucking is a talent whose cultivation is the mark of a person who realizes that it doesn't have to be just a quickie, but my mind is a little fuzzy and, to be honest, getting his long, stiff length between my lips feels as good to me as it probably does to him. I just let myself go, shaping my muzzle to his hardness, feeling it out with my tongue, sliding up the length and around his sensitive barbed tip, which always gives me a little twinge of memory under my tail.

Whatever he was thinking, it's gone as I cup his balls and slide my muzzle up and down, leaving his shaft glistening and trembling. With one free paw, I open my own pants and let my erection hang out, stroking a paw along my own length. See, I can't be that drunk, or I wouldn't be able to get this hard. But then again, I've never been drunk around my tiger before. Maybe he's an aphrodisiac powerful enough to counter the effects of alcohol. If I could bottle that... but I don't have to. I have him, and screw everyone else.

At this point, I'm so wound up that as much as I'd like a proper reunion, I'll be happy if he comes in my mouth while I shoot all over the hotel floor. He's moaning, I've got my eyes closed and my mouth full of wonderful, delicious tiger, jamming in all the way to the back of my throat and then pulling out so just his tip is set between my lips, letting my tongue flick it teasingly. I can feel the bristling of my tail and a nice warmth building up between my legs, where my paw is working faster.

"Lee..." he chokes out again between moans.

He's making some kind of movement, probably toward the bed. I don't need to get to the bed. I just want to finish this, more than anything right now. I ignore the protest, and the tightening of his paw on my shoulder tells me that it wasn't that serious a protest anyway.

I'm getting good pressure with the base of my tongue against his shaft as he slides in and out. I can taste his musk over the slightly stale taste of

beer, even more intoxicating and rare. My paw feels damp; I rub my thumb over my tip to make myself shiver, squeeze my growing knot. He growls and lashes his tail around to curl under my shoulders.

That's when there's a loud knock at the door.

"Mmmph," I say, and don't stop. Room service or something.

Dev reacts abruptly and sharply, pushing my shoulder and stepping back, then trying frantically to stuff his hard, glistening length back into his pants. "Lee," he hisses, "it's Hellentown."

"Forget about it, Dev," I say, pulling out the movie reference. "It's *Hellentown*."

He's not laughing, which peeves me, but I don't have time to be upset. He points at the door and forces me toward it, pushing me aside at the last moment into the sliding closet. "Be right there," he calls, then glares down at me and makes a gesture, sealing his lips shut with his fingers. He's been this rough with me before, and the intensity is always frightening. I sit there half-angry, half-terrified, as the closet door slides shut and I hear the hotel room door open.

"Devlin Miski? George Tuppan. This is Coach Shymer and Jenkins."

I can smell them, over the sex and beer and thick tiger musk permeating the track suit I'm sitting on, and they sure as heck can smell me. "Don't you hate it when they let foxes clean the rooms?" a different voice says. "Phew. Can't ever get rid of the sunk."

"Come on in," Dev says, after an awkward pause. There's some shuffling sounds and they all move away from the closet, thank goodness. I'm frozen, not daring even to zip up my pants in case they hear me. Every breath I take seems magnified, echoing off the walls of the tiny, confined space. I have to breathe through my mouth because my nose whistles.

"It's late," the first voice—Tuppan?—says, "so we'll get right down to it."

They ask him a bunch of questions about his teammates, his play in certain games and what he learned, and as they're doing this I'm sinking further into despondency. I was drunk, *am* drunk, in fact, and I didn't even stop to think that maybe he was trying to stop me because he'd made an appointment. Just because my day was over didn't mean his was going to be. And here I am, jeopardizing his career because I was a little pent-up. Could I have been more selfish? Possibly, though it was hard to imagine how. I picture the general manager catching me in the room, sheath

hanging out, drunk, and what it would mean for Dev. Maybe not just the end of his chances with Hellentown, but with the whole league, if it got out. A kid who's a marginal pick at best needs every advantage he could get, and an oversexed boyfriend definitely ticks in the disadvantages column. Stupid, stupid fox.

"We noticed," one of the coaches says outside, "that your play picked up significantly your senior year. Looks like you figured something out."

"Yeah, I did," Dev says.

Another voice. "Was that from Coach, um..." A rustling of papers.

"Kimble. Partly," Dev says. "But also, there was a friend of mine who..." They let him gather his thoughts. "He kind of pointed out to me that there were a few things I could be doing better."

"Not one of the coaching staff?" one voice says, at the same time as another says, "What kind of things?"

He recites off some of the stuff we'd talked about last year: proper positioning for the play, proper footwork, precision in routes, and reading the opposing plays. He's exaggerating. He was already pretty good at running routes and reading plays. He was just sloppy.

"Pretty good friend," one coach says.

Tuppan chimes in again. "Knows a lot about football?" He's got a high voice, which makes me picture him as a weasel. I try to remember whether I've seen any pictures of him, and I can't bring any to mind. Coach Shymer is a wolf, a former backup quarterback. I'd love to ask him how it felt to hold for the kick that won the championship in '73.

"Yeah," Dev says. "He was a big help." Did I imagine the emphasis on 'was'? I cringe, trying to do it as quietly as possible. I wonder if I can gnaw through the wall and into the next room without making any noise. Probably not.

They talk football for another ten or fifteen minutes, tell him they'll be talking to his coach, ask questions about his family. I say ten or fifteen minutes because I figure out later that that's how long it is, but if you'd asked me while I was huddled in the closet, I would've said it was at least two hours. I itch in a dozen places I don't dare scratch, my sheath is cold from being out in the air, my mouth is dry from not breathing through my nose, and every second they're not speaking is a second I'm telling myself what an idiot I am. Oh, and also, as my erection vanishes, I have to pee. Badly.

The only thing that stops me from making a mess on the bottom of my closet is that I'm sure they'll smell it on the way out. The only thing worse than being walked in on would be being discovered after a successful interview, which is what it sounds like this is. At the very least, they're continuing to ask him questions, where I imagine they would just terminate the interview, especially at 10 or 11 or 1 am or whatever the hell it is now on the last day. Of course, they do keep asking him why he switched from being a defensive end, which is ridiculous because he never was a defensive end. But when he tells them that, they come back a minute later with "so when did you make the change?" Idiots. No wonder they've missed the playoffs six years in a row.

My back is stiff, my bladder is about to burst, my neck is killing me, my right leg is asleep, and the fleas from my hotel room must have followed me here and are having a party for all their friends in my tail, stomach, back, all over. I focus on the questions and remind myself that I've already been enough of an idiot, thinking back to each beer and swearing that I will never, ever, ever get this drunk again.

It's 6 am the following Tuesday when they finally get up and walk to the door. "Good talking to you," Tuppan says.

"Hellentown is a great organization," Dev says. "I'd be proud to be a part of it."

"Let's hope it works out," one of the coaches, probably Shymer, says. I hear the lupine growl in his tired rasp. "Night," Dev says, and closes the door.

I wait for another eternity. I can hear him breathing on the other side of the door, can feel him standing there, but I don't dare move for fear that maybe the Hellentown guys haven't left. Which is stupid, of course, because what would they be doing, all clustered together around the closet with Dev? Waiting to see how long before I pee on the closet floor?

The door slides open. Dev's staring down at me. "Can't believe you kept quiet," he rumbles.

I scramble past him and to the bathroom, swinging the door shut and not even waiting to hear it latch as I relieve myself, moaning in satisfaction. I give myself a good scratching at the same time, fluffing my tail out and stroking it back into place. When I've zipped up and wiped my paws, I hesitate in front of the bathroom door, which isn't even all the way closed. Ears down, I ease it open, half-hoping Dev will be curled up on the



bed facing away from me so I can just slink out of the room.

He's sitting right on the bed, of course, staring at the door as though it's an opposing quarterback. When I poke my muzzle out, he lifts a paw and crooks a finger, beckoning me toward him.

It's a terrifying feeling, a completely different kind of terror than when he threw me into the closet. I've always been the one in control, the one who knew what he was doing and knew what Dev was doing before he did, half the time. I know I've fucked up, here, and I have no idea what to expect from him. His expression is completely neutral and I can't smell him over the beer on my breath. I shuffle across the floor like a cub.

For the span of several heartbeats, we stare at each other. Then we both start talking at the same time, and, amazingly, our words are exactly the same.

"I'm sorry..."

I stare at him. "What on the green earth could you possibly be sorry about?"

"For throwing you in the closet."

"The closet? I deserved to be thrown out of the window!"

He peers at me. "You're drunk."

It's such a surreal moment. I thought it was fucking obvious, like I might as well have staggered in with my tongue hanging out and eyes crossed. I reek of beer, I'm slurring my words... but of course, he doesn't have a fox's nose. And suddenly, the whole thing, this whole scenario, is absurd. Of *course* I'm drunk. Did he think I just wandered in here all loopy and horny without the benefit of alcohol? I stare at him, and I can see every wrinkle in his very slight frown, like he's just starting to figure out whether to be annoyed that I just burst into his room and started sucking him off, or to forgive me because I'm drunk, or to be angry because I'm drunk, and I can't help it. I giggle.

He frowns a little more, right as my gut chooses to send a little bubble of air back up. It's halfway between a burp and a hiccup, but it's the funniest noise in the world. I giggle again, and this time I can't stop. It's even funnier because he keeps frowning, and I have to clutch my stomach, doubled over from laughing so hard. I sit down on the floor, the nice plush carpet, howling with laughter because even if his face weren't screwed up comically trying to figure out what's going on, the giggles are just building off themselves now in a way they haven't in years.

"Lee," he says patiently, making me fall onto my side, shaking with giggles. I turn over onto my back and close my eyes, hoping it'll run its course but enjoying it at the same time. "What's so funny?"

"I'm drunk," I try to explain in between snorting laughs. Clamping a paw around my muzzle just hurts my throat when the convulsions are trapped back in there, so I let it out again.

"And that's funny?"

"No," I choke out, which is funny enough in and of itself to set me off all over again, though I try not to laugh so noisily this time. Shaking with silent mirth, at least I can't see his face anymore. I've gone from horny to depressed to hysterical in about half an hour, forty-five minutes tops, and the more I think about it, the funnier it is.

I know Dev's not going to be patient much longer, but I have no idea which way he'll swing. He lands beside me on the floor with a thump a moment later. "Are you laughing at me?"

I shake my head, but I keep laughing. He draws his paw back and cuffs my muzzle. Not hard, just enough to pause my giggling.

He's never hit me, but then, I've never been this drunk and laughing. New territory for both of us, no history to fall back on. I look up at him and judge whether the hitting was something to get concerned about or not. He doesn't look really mad, nor particularly inclined to hit me again now I've stopped laughing. And I do feel more sober now. "What was that for?" I ask.

"To stop you laughing," he replies, very reasonably.

"You plan on doing that again, stud?"

I think it dawns on him then that there *is* some history there, just not ours. He shrinks back and his muzzle dips. "No."

Silence. We both look at each other. It occurs to me that I never finished my apology from before. "I'm sorry," I said. "For just bursting in and taking advantage of you. And for laughing, just now. It just all seemed so funny."

"I've never seen you this drunk," he says. "It's weird."

"And a little funny?"

His muzzle quirks. "A little."

We lie there for a few more minutes, just looking at each other. His tail lashes back and forth. Mine stays still. "Sorry for hitting you," he says.

I shake my head, slightly. "S'okay." I'm trying to decide between

kissing him and getting up to leave. Sleeping on my uncomfortable floor feels like the appropriate penance, but the heat between my legs is growing again with Dev's nearness, keeping me anchored to him. So I just sigh and say, "Tell me about your weekend."

"Let's go up on the bed," he says, getting partway up.

I look up at him. "I've slept on the floor for three nights," I say. "Good for the back."

I can see him trying to figure out whether I'm serious or not. Then he reaches down and lifts me as if I were a sack of clothes. Holding me over the bed, he hesitates. "You're not gonna puke, are you?"

The ceiling and world are only moderately shaky, and definitely not spinny. "I don't think so. Are you going to shake me?"

He grins and sets me down. "Not tonight." Carefully, he lies next to me again. "Why were you drinking?"

"Loneliness."

He knows me too well to fall for that one. "Uh-huh. And who was drinking with you?"

"My libido and my passion for you." He keeps looking at me, steadily. "And Morty and Vic."

"Full table," he rumbles.

"We squeezed in."

He grins. "How much can your libido drink?"

"I was trying to show you," I say with dignity, "when those guys from Hellentown barged in."

I get a good laugh out of him for that, and a kiss on my snout. "I could stand a beer after this weekend," he says. "It was more exhausting than a game."

"Think you have a shot with anyone?"

He nods. "Hellentown, maybe. Hilltown too."

"Pity there aren't more H-towns in the league."

He grins back. "I'd be a shoo-in."

"Like a tiger in a fox," I say.

"Mmm." He rests a huge paw on my arm, claws extended. I shiver. "I think I did okay."

"You didn't break any records in the 40."

"I ran close to my best."

"But not your best." I'm getting hard again, just from being close to

him. At least I'm sober enough to restrain myself from acting on it now. I think.

He frowns, then sighs. "No."

"If you were worried about all those other guys, you shouldn't be. You're as good as any of them."

He names the top prospect, the fox who blew everyone away. "Am I as good as Russell?"

"You could be."

He shakes his head. "I'd need your build."

I give him a light shove in the chest. "Success is making the best of your natural abilities, and that includes brains."

"Russell's pretty smart."

I wave a paw. "So what? You're smarter."

"You are drunk." He shakes his head. His claws draw lines of fire down my arm. They fade slowly. "I'm not smarter."

"Sure you are." I meet his look and grin. "You're here with me, aren't you? Q.E.D."

He half-grins. "I dunno what that means, doc, but it ain't football."

"It means, shut up and kiss me already."

He does, and the world stops, and it's good. There's only him and me, and a tiny bit of residual sloshing in the back of my head. When it stops, when we slide apart, I look into his eyes. "Dev?"

"Hm?"

"What happens if you do get drafted?"

He peers at me. "Well, I'm not sure, but I think they'll want me to put on a uniform and play football. Just a guess. I ain't all educated like you."

I shake my head. "I mean, about us."

"Oh."

"Am I going to be hiding in closets in hotels all over the country? Sneaking around hoping we don't get found out?"

He shrugs. "First things first, I guess. If I get on a team, I'll worry about it then."

"Would you give me up to play football?"

"If I get on a team, I'll worry about it."

"You'll get drafted. You're that good. So..."

For an answer, or maybe just to shut me up, he kisses me again. I take the hint and let the question go. There's months before that's an issue,

anyway. I move my paw down his side, to his hip, suggesting more, and he breaks the kiss to look at me. "You still drunk?"

I shake my head. The room wobbles a little bit, but returns to normal immediately. When he hesitates, I reach over with my free paw and trace a line along his hips. "I wanna show you how good you can be."

"I'm not getting drafted for *that*" he says, but he purrs throatily at my touch.

"Nobody else here to work out for."

He's still hesitating. I flick my ears. "I'm really not that drunk any more. Do I smell?"

"No, I was just wondering..." I stop my wandering paw. He looks uncertain. "You think you could find out... if I moved up on any lists?"

I give him a sly grin. "Well, I don't know about that," I say.

He thinks he understands, moving his paw down my midriff. "Do I need to be more persuasive?"

"Maybe." I wait until he's found the hardness between my legs, and that makes further thought difficult. I sneak my fingers over to his, finding it just as ready as mine, so I start undoing his pants. Once I get my paw all the way inside, cupped around his nice, hot sheath, the conversation dies away. Now he kisses me, and though I'm not drunk any more (much), I am a little self-conscious about the beer taste in my mouth. Dev doesn't seem to mind, judging by the passion with which his tongue invades it.

He shifts his weight, bearing over me and fumbling at my pants while my paw strokes him, pushing his pants down further with each stroke until his balls are hanging out over his naked thigh. I tease around them and then stroke back up that delicious length. He shoves his paw inside my loosened pants, warm pads gripping my erection so tightly that I moan against his tongue, eliciting a satisfied growl as he crushes his muzzle to mine. Letting me know how much he missed me.

I work him harder, already feeling him dripping against my fingers. I want him inside me, badly, but I don't have any lube on me and I'm sure it's not the sort of thing the hotel or the league provides to the kids here. I've used the ol' "spit and polish" in the past, but never with Dev. He's pretty big. But the way he's pressing and grinding against me is lighting a fire in my cock, and the more I imagine it, the more I want him.

His breathing's getting harsher. I pull my paw away and work it up under his shirt, enjoying the hard-packed muscles under his fur. In my

mind, I can see him stretching, taut and lean on the field, muscles coiled and tensed to explode at the starter's gun. I see them bulging and straining at the bench press. Sure, I can't help seeing some of the other kids, but I'm not in bed with them, am I? So it's okay. I'm sure he doesn't just picture me when we're in bed. Actually, I don't know what he pictures. I've never asked.

He's getting more insistent with his paw, and those thoughts aren't able to collect and cohere, not with the attention he's paying to my already full shaft and balls, so if I'm gonna do anything besides lay here and come, I need to decide to do it now.

Fuck it. It's a need, not a choice. I squirm around, making him pause, and get my mouth around his cock again. The taste is much stronger than it was an hour ago, and I savor that, mostly trying to get him slick enough that this'll work, but not neglecting his sensitive parts. The tongue's in there, might as well be of use.

He sprawls back on the bed, all orange and white and black-striped lean beauty. I keep my eyes open just so I can admire him, and as it often does, the thought comes to mind that to have found this spirit in this talented, gorgeous body is a huge stroke of luck on my part. Most football players, by the time they get to college, are so used to being the center of attention that their ego has to get a separate dorm room. Dev spent three years being above average on a small-time program at a school where athletics was secondary to education, and despite the fact that most of the guys on the team managed to strut around like they owned the campus anyway, he never let that go to his head.

Plus he was gay and didn't know it. That's beyond hot.

In between bobbing up and down and watching him twitch and purr-growl, I spit on my paw and work that under my tail, until it's nice and slick and Dev is squirming so much that I know my mouth'll be full of tiger musk in another minute. I don't think he's noticed what else I was doing, so it's a bit of a surprise when I slide off his muzzle, work a leg out of my pants, and straddle him. Golden eyes fly open, stare up at me.

"Lee?" I smirk and nod, settling him against my tailhole. It takes a lot of restraint for me not to just plunge down on him. "We don't have any..."

"S'okay," I tell him, and push down to make my point. His eyes roll back and he doesn't argue, unless a choking moan and strong paws clutching my hips are an argument. It's rougher than it usually is with the

lube, but it feels good. I let him hold my hips, because that feels good too, pushing up against his strength and then letting him shove me back down. I take care of my own shaft, which is rock hard, shaking off any effects of alcohol nicely (though I've never been one of those guys who can't perform while drunk).

I know sex isn't the same as love, but it really helps us express love. My stupid actions earlier in the evening fall away, and I writhe with my tiger, both of us feeling the same sensations and sharing the experience with each other. He bucks up into me, driving so deeply I feel him all through my body, clenching my jaw, bristling out my fur, arching my tail and curling my toes. My paw clenches around myself, I pant as I watch the contortions on his face and feel him pulling me towards him, and I match my growls to his, pushing his shirt up further with my other paw so I can see his chest heave. I press my weight down against him to feel his power as he presses back, and to get closer to him as we surge toward release together.

It's hot and powerful, his claws digging into my thighs as his neck muscles strain. His sharp, deep thrusts burying his length in me are all it takes to send me over the edge too. Barking throatily, I empty myself onto his chest, muscles tight, paw working myself to get every last drop out. I shudder and reach back so I can feel the tightness of his balls, the stretching where he's entering me, and the hardness at the base of his shaft. I rub there as we both slowly relax, panting, and look into each other's eyes.

Now I feel the warmth, and with it a wave of sleepiness. I lean on his chest with both paws, lower myself to kiss him on the muzzle, and he slides his paws up my sides as he kisses me back. "Nothing like you," he rasps.

"You either," I say.

I let him pull out of me, with more relief than usual. My body drifts down to his side, I yawn hugely, and snuggle against him. He purrs and pulls an arm around me. "So," he says, "now do you think you can find out where I stand?"

"Mm." I rub my nose into his short fur, inhaling. "I don't know."

"How much more persuasive," he trails claws through my thigh fur, making me squirm, "do I need to be?"

"S'not that," I mumble. "I mean the Dragons offered me a job so I

dunno if I'm allowed to tell."

He's quiet for a minute, his claws going still. "They what?"

"Not definite," I say, eyes still closed. "Morty says he liked what I did, he's gonna recommend they give me a trial run for a few months. Up to the draft."

I feel the prickling of his claws, but he doesn't say anything, still. I crack one eye open. He's staring at me. "You were going to tell me this when?"

I grin. "After."

"It's after now."

"And I'm telling you."

He pulls me tighter. "That's great! It's like you got drafted, kinda."

"Kinda." I'm too sleepy to argue semantics.

"Are you excited?"

"Not any more." I feign sudden realization. "Oh, about the job. I guess, yeah."

"What are you going to do about school?"

I shake my head. "Didn't really think about it."

"What about your parents?"

What does it pay? "Don't kill my buzz."

He's quiet for a little longer, stroking my fur, and then he says, "I'm gonna shower. Be right back."

"Mm," I say as he slips away from me, and that's just about the last thing I remember until the sun stabs me in the face the next morning.

The bed still smells like tiger, though it's hard for me to focus on that over the searing pain behind my eyeballs, throbbing in my head. It's not the worst hangover I've had, but it's bad enough, and to compound it, I'm now feeling the effects of having a tiger in me without completely adequate lubrication. Somewhere over the night I shed my pants completely, but I still have a shirt on, which smells like beer. Or maybe that's me. I pull the sheets over my head and try to go back to sleep.

Some minutes, or hours, later, I vaguely think I hear someone knocking. "Go 'way," I mumble into the pillow, folding my ears down and shoving them under the soft foam. I assume, in my hung over haze, that that'll be the end of it.

A moment later, I feel the blankets over my bare rear and tail being swept back. I make the worst possible move: flipping onto my side to see

who it is, which has the dual effect of sending lancing pains through my head and giving the doe holding the blankets a full view of my equipment. I'm proud to say that it's fully recovered from the night's activities and has assumed its usual morning position at full mast. I stare at the maid for maybe half a second before the pain hits and I wince, shutting my eyes and clapping my paws over my muzzle—had I thought of it, I would've clapped them somewhere else, but this was reflex.

The blankets drop back onto me. I hear scurrying feet, and then the door closing. I think she said something. I hope it was "sorry." I couldn't really catch it.

After a shower, I feel a lot better. I find my pants and a note from Dev that says he had a league breakfast and he couldn't wake me up. Which probably means he didn't try hard, remembering I'd been drinking, and just forgot to leave the "Do not disturb" sign out on the door. I decide to go find my own breakfast on my way back to my hotel. Checking out is the first thing I've looked forward to doing there.

It's over my McMuffin that I start to think about what Dev said. What will I do about school? Because the truth is, I haven't been really focused this term, and I'm going to need to step it up. The movie and creative writing I could do in my sleep, but I'm barely through a quarter of the book my TA asked me to read for the lit review class, and I haven't done more than outline my senior thesis. I kind of need that to graduate, so I can't just slough it off altogether. I tap the steaming coffee cup with a claw and wonder if I can fake the writeup I promised for lit review, and whether the library will be open when I get back to Forester so I can finally look up some sources to decide what to write my thesis on. But both of those thoughts are really just circumventing the main question.

If I take this job with the Dragons, then I'm going to have to drop the lit review. I think I can still graduate if I keep the other two and finish my senior thesis. That'll mean a lot of sleepless nights. But I can do it.

The real question, of course, is which means more to me, the job or the degree. I have a sense of pride with the degree, and I certainly intend to finish it if I can. But the job could be my career. And hey, I can always go get the degree later. I know a few fifth-year seniors. If I have to take another year to finish up, I can do that. No matter what my father thinks.

I check out of my hotel, with some choice words for the quality of the room that fall on uncaring ears. On my way to the bus stop, my phone

rings.

"Hi, sexy," I say, expecting Dev's voice on the other end.

"Wiley?"

Oh, uh, shit. Teach me to look at the number before answering. "Hi, Mother."

"Is this a... are you busy?"

"No, no, this is fine." I try to put out of my mind what I just said to my mother. "What's going on?"

"Where are you?"

I look around. "Outside some Peet's in Boliat." Shit. I forgot to lie.

"Boliat? Why are you in Boliat?"

"There was a football thing here." I check a nearby clock; I've got plenty of time to make my bus.

"You didn't answer your phone all weekend."

"I've had it with me."

"I mean, your other phone."

I roll my eyes. "Why did you give me this phone if you're just going to call my room?"

"That's the number we have programmed into our phone. I had to call the company to find out this number. What are you doing in Boliat?"

"I told you, there's a football thing here."

"But what are you doing? Just watching it?"

Close enough. "Yes, Mother. Just watching. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Just going to the nursery today to get some tomatoes and maybe some geraniums for the new border we just put in. Have you been down there all week?"

"Just since Wednesday night. How's the weather up there?"

"Wednesday night? Wiley, what about your classes?"

"My classes are fine." Great. This, I lie about.

She gets that tone in her voice. "But if you've been gone all week?" and now I can hear my father in the background. I can't hear his words, but the 'he'd better not be doing that' tone is unmistakable. "He says they're fine," she says to him.

"Let me talk to him," I hear my father say.

"I'm at the bus station. I need to go. Say hi to Father for me."

He's already on the phone. "Wiley, you're not failing your classes, are you?"

"It's fine. I'm fine. I need to hang up."

"I'm not paying thirty thousand dollars..."

I hate this speech. "You took out a loan."

"It's still costing me money. And you're treating it like it's some kind of party."

I sigh. "I'm taking the bus back to Forester now. It leaves in ten minutes."

My mother comes back on the line. "Call us when you get back."

"I will, Mother, I promise."

"I love you."

"Love you too." I hang up the phone and walk into Peet's to get a coffee for the ride back. The bus won't leave for half an hour, and the station's only two blocks away.

When I get home, there are two messages on my machine: the first from Father, telling me to call him with a report on my classes. The second is from Jason, my lit review TA, telling me that he and my advisor want to see me tomorrow morning at eleven. If it's convenient. It's not, but I have nothing scheduled against it, and so I have to go show up. Jason's a nice guy, an arctic fox who occasionally pings my gaydar. I say occasionally because that's about how often I've been seeing him lately.

He greets me with a smile, dressed sharply as usual. My advisor, Dr. Schruft, smells like he's been wearing the same light blue shirt and tan sweater vest for the last two weeks. For a bobcat, he's not very fastidious. He barely acknowledges my entry while Jason says, "Have a seat."

We wait for him to finish whatever he's doing with the papers on his desk, which looks to me like intently making me wait. Finally, he looks up and says to Jason, "Go ahead."

"Wiley," Jason says, "We wanted to talk to you about 18th Century Lit Review." He pauses to wait for me to say something, but the first thing that comes to mind is *yeah, I know I'm not doing well*, which doesn't seem to me to be helpful. So I keep quiet, and he goes on. "You turned in some good work the first couple weeks of the semester, and I really enjoyed your participation in the discussions. But lately your presence has been missed."

"You're failing," Schruft says bluntly.

"I'd be happy to give you a passing grade if you turn in more work of the caliber of the first two assignments," Jason says. His body language is

apologetic, so I'm guessing Schruft wasn't in on our little arrangement about me missing the entire past week for the combine.

Schruft glances at him. "If you think that simply because you have completed ninety-eight percent of the required work for this degree that you can, what is the term, coast through this last class, you are mistaken. I thought that we had made that abundantly clear your sophomore year, when we had our first meeting and I told you that I would not tolerate any slacking throughout our association. Simply because that association is nearly at an end, do not feel that my standards are loosening."

"I remember," I say, because it's the only thing I can think of that won't get me thrown out of his office immediately.

"I told Dr. Schruft that I don't think you're trying to coast," Jason says, then turns to the bobcat. "I've talked to Wiley a couple times and he has assured me that his distractions are legitimate."

"And what distractions are those?"

Now they're both looking at me, while I try to remember what I've been telling Jason. It's no use lying about a family problem, because if I already mentioned the football, then lying will just make it worse. I hate lying because I hate being lied to, but even if that weren't the case, I wouldn't be able to handle the work of remembering what I've said to whom. "I've been exploring an internship," I say carefully.

"At a literary journal, perhaps?" Dr. Schruft does sarcasm well. "I don't recall seeing a request for a recommendation cross my desk."

"It's... with a football team."

To judge solely from their reactions, I might have just told them that I was expecting to be appointed the next CEO of General Motors. The uncomfortable silence stretches on and on until my advisor says, with exaggerated disbelief, "A football team? Doing what? *Marketing?*"

"Scouting," I tell them. "It turns out I'm good at it."

"That's great," Jason says, with a smile that feels genuine.

Dr. Schruft turns a withering glance on him. "What you choose to do with the degree you earn is, of course, your own choice and your own responsibility, Wiley. However, what you do in order to earn it is, at least in part, mine. And it would be a dereliction of my duty to my students to fail to warn you that if you persist in pursuing this... football internship... that you will be seriously jeopardizing your chances at attaining that degree."

"I was hoping we could work something out," I say.

"We decided that if you can just attend most of the rest of the sessions," Jason begins.

Schruft cuts him off. "All of the rest of the sessions, Wiley, and take part actively in the discussion. And turn in all the assignments for the rest of the term."

Jason's ears go back slightly and his whiskers twitch, eyes widening just a touch. A moment later, I catch a shift in his scent: surprise. "I thought," he says, and Schruft cuts him off again.

"All of the rest of the sessions," he repeats.

They both look at me. "If I could just turn in the reports," I say, "and maybe come to one session a week..."

Before Jason can get one word out, Schruft starts talking again. "Wiley, let me put this in terms you will be able to understand. You are a yard away from the goal line, and this class is your fourth down. Anything short of the full yard will leave you shy of your goal."

I refrain from telling him that in football, one doesn't drive towards one's own goal, and say instead, "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

They both look at me, Schruft angry, Jason sympathetic but guarded. "Well, then," Schruft says, "it looks like you have to decide where your priorities lie."

I try Morty that evening, but he's in the middle of something. He says he'll call back. So I call my father to get him off my back with some verbal stalling, at least temporarily. Morty calls back an hour later.

"You ever been to West Hamburg?" he asks me.

"Sadly, no."

"Don't go," he says. "It's a pit. There's one decent bar in the place and it closes at one."

"On a college campus?"

"Yeah, I know. The kids must be drinking somewhere else. I can't really ask 'em, though. Like asking your boss where to find a hooker."

I pretend not to have heard that. "Senior day there, I guess?"

He rattles off the names of a few prospects he's seen. "But you're calling about the job. McCallum's okay with us bringing you on, but he says we can't pay you during the internship. And we wouldn't bring you on full time 'til July, right before the college camps open."

"Okay." I try to make sure it sounds more upbeat than I feel.

"Figure you wouldn't be making money in school anyway, right?"

"So I can keep going to school?" Maybe there's an upside to not being paid after all.

"Sure." He coughs, a good, hacking, cigarette cough. "We don't get in usually 'til the afternoons anyway. If you can get in by three and work through dinner, that's all we need."

The lit review class, of course, is at 1: 30 Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'd have to leave a half hour into it to get down to the Dragons' facility by three. "Let me call you back tomorrow," I say.

I've bought myself time, but I already know what my answer is. Scouting, being useful around the game, made me feel better than anything else I've done—as a career, anyway. Even acting. So I decide I'll try to work out the scheduling. I call Morty back and accept the internship.

For a week, I try to do both, leaving the lit review halfway through and arriving a bit late to the Dragons. It's clear by the end of Thursday that neither group is happy with this arrangement. But dropping the lit review class is serious, and it's something that, like it or not, I'm going to have to discuss with my parents.

Mother, predictably, is delighted to hear my voice. She wants to know how things are going, I say great, and I weigh my options. Father's going to be the big stumbling block, of course. Is it worth it to get Mother on my side only to have Father put the kibosh on both of us? I'm not sure. As it happens, I don't end up making that decision anyway. She asks about classes and before I know it, I say, "Well, I do have this problem."

I can almost see her ears shoot up. "What's the problem, honey?"

"Well," I say, "it's about the one class I'm taking. It conflicts with something I really want to do, but I do sort of need it to graduate."

"If you need it to graduate," she says, "then you need to keep taking the class."

I take a breath. "Thing is," I say, "if this other thing works out, then I might not need to graduate."

"I don't understand," she says. "Not need to graduate? But what would you do?"

It takes me a good long time to force myself to say the words. "It's this football thing."

"Oh, Wiley."

"Mother, I met this guy, and he offered me a job—"

"It's just a game, it's not something you ever even played—"

"—with the Dragons, the Hilltown Dragons—"

"—I know you watched it, but so do thousands of other boys—"

"—and it might lead to a real job if I'm good at it, and I am—"

"Wait, it's not even a real job?"

Just possibly, I may not have presented the facts in the optimal order.

"It's an internship, Mother, that's how they all start."

But already I hear her calling my father, and a second later he's picked up an extension. Great, I don't even get them one at a time. "What's this about football?"

"It's an internship with the Dragons," I say quickly.

That doesn't prevent my mother from getting out, "Harold, he's working for free."

"You couldn't get a paid internship?" my father says. "It's not like the Dragons need money. They just signed Hartwell for 17 million."

"How many years?"

"They offer you a job and don't tell you these things?"

"If it's more than three, it's too many," I say.

"Don't change the subject," he says. "So what's the problem?"

I take a breath, again, but my mother beats me to it. "He wants to drop his classes and not graduate."

"Put off graduation," I say. "I still want to graduate."

"With a summer class?"

There's a silence that I know I have to break. Finally, I do. "Summer's a pretty busy time, actually."

"When, then? Next December? Next June?"

"I don't know."

"I'll tell you," Father says. "If you get this job, you'll never go back. I didn't pay over a hundred thousand dollars for you to get three and a half years of an education and no degree."

"It's always about the money with you," I say.

"That's because I know the value of it." Another variant, same old melody. "I've tried to pass that on to you. I've obviously failed."

"I know the value of money." I pace the room. "There's just other things, too."

"Like what?"

How do I say, *like doing a job I'm not going to hate? Or like living a childhood dream?* "Like doing a job that's fun."

"You don't base your life on what's fun. Right?"

Damn him for remembering my words. Damn me for saying them. "I thought college was when I was supposed to discover life and take chances."

"You think if you don't finish college, you can keep wasting your life?"

"I'll finish, I promise," I say, but he's not done.

"You don't graduate this June, and you'll be responsible for your own student loans."

It takes a moment for that to sink in. I do some rough figuring in my head. "*What?*"

"You heard me."

"I can't believe you're threatening me. Like some loan shark or something."

Mother says, sharply, "Wiley!"

"Just doing our job as parents to make sure you get a good education."

"I'm apparently learning extortion."

"Wiley Victor Farrel." She's good and mad now. It always did take her a couple minutes to catch up to Father and me.

"Well, do you have another name for it, Mother? Because I sure don't."

"It doesn't matter what you call it," Father says coolly.

"You're serious."

"Just try me and see."

"You have plenty of money. I know you do."

"It's not about the money. It's about the principle."

"You'd want me to pass up this opportunity just to get a piece of paper."

He sounds more detached than I know he is. I can picture the folded-back ears, the narrowed eyes. "I wouldn't call an unpaid internship with no promise of anything more an 'opportunity'."

"This is a really incredible thing they've offered me. Millions of guys would kill to have this chance."

"You can get something better. You don't have to jump at the first job offer you get."

I feel remarks crowding my throat, fighting to get out. I can't choke out any of them. "This isn't just a job offer!"

"Call it whatever you want," he says, off-handedly. "As long as we understand each other."

I don't even know what to say. Father doesn't wait long for me to come up with something. "Do we?" he says.

"Yeah," I force out. "Yeah, we understand each other just fine." It's an effort not to slam the phone down, to force myself through the end-of-call pleasantries until I can get out the door.

I go to campus for a walk through the quad. Spring is just beginning to peek through the shell of winter. Scraps of snow cling to the crooks of branches, defying the moist, temperate air. The rows of trees feel like prison guards, despite the fact that I've always loved walking through this area, even in winter. I was always the one, among all my friends, who loved school and loved being a part of it. Studying, learning, watching football — Brian came the closest to understanding that, but he always found Forester lacking. He would've been happier in Whitford, outside the Peco megalopolis, rather than a couple hours north of second city Aventira.

For me, Forester has always been just right. I can learn, be challenged, excel. This last year with Dev has taught me more than any class I've taken, and that, too, I owe to the middle-country sensibilities. On the coasts, everyone is hyper-aware of what everything *means*. Dev would not have been an innocently closeted — no, not even closeted, but oblivious — jock on either coast. He would've couched his defenses in elaborate politically correct speech, or biting sarcasm. We'd have snapped back and forth at each other, he might've thrown a punch (but not really, that's too honest a reaction), and gone our separate ways. I would right now be happily or worriedly preparing to graduate with an English degree, remembering the time I got under the skin of one of those uppity jocks, probably telling the story for the fortieth time over tea to my equally snooty literary friends.

My parents grew up in Port City. They look down their noses, very slightly, on the people they've chosen to live among. And that, if I may be permitted some armchair psychoanalysis, is probably what bothers them about my not graduating. They wanted me to go to Whitford or Pemberton rather than middle-tier Forester, eventually giving in because of Forester's sparkling liberal arts ranking, and because I promised I'd apply myself. But

for me to leave school to go take some football job is just too midwestern for them. For many of our neighbors, the kids of my generation were the first in their families to attend college. My parents don't want me to be the first in a long line of my family to fail to graduate from one. I mean, what would they say to the neighbors?

I wander around through the grounds, feeling the chill beneath my feet and looking up at the skeletal branches interlocking over my head. I can't afford a hundred thousand dollars, even on whatever salary I might get from the Dragons. But every part of me rebels against giving in to the threats, a trait that, ironically, my parents themselves bred into me. Not to mention that I had fun doing the Dragons' work and I'm good at it. If it were just disobeying my parents, well, I could manage that, as evidenced by my relationship with a male tiger. But the money... the thought of the weight of that debt landing on my shoulders makes me hunch over as I walk.

Speaking of Dev, he's supposed to come over tonight. He rented a place off campus, but we haven't gotten together there at all. My place is more comfortable, more convenient. Maybe I should go to his place now, and not wait for tonight. The thought of his arms around me makes me all warm inside. But I don't want to involve him in my drama. Maybe it'd be better to let myself cool down some more before we get together.

By the time I argue myself into letting myself see him, it's already evening and he's on his way over. That's okay. I just won't mention my parents, I decide. I'll just let him comfort me without knowing why.

"They're what?"

I sigh, and give in to the pressure on my shoulder, rolling onto my back to look into Dev's muzzle. He's on his side, both of us fresh from the shower, but any post-coital sleepiness is gone from his expression. He rests a paw on my stomach, inches from my exhausted sheath, the gesture intimate but not arousing. "If I drop the lit review class and don't graduate, they won't pay my student loans."

"How much... how much is that?"

I rest my paw atop his. "Something over a hundred grand."

He nods. "That's what mine are. I thought your parents were rich, though."

"We didn't pay cash for tuition. My father shuffled some things around

so we'd qualify for a loan. He said student loans are a good investment because of the interest rate and the repayment terms."

"And because you can blackmail your kids with them?"

"He's using threats to force me to do something I don't want to, not threatening me with exposure of some nasty... little... secret." I punctuate the last few words with light brushes over his sheath.

He closes his eyes, but doesn't purr. "That's just... that's not..." I don't say anything, moving my paw to his hip and brushing the soft, slightly damp fur. He opens his eyes to look at me. "So what are you going to do?"

"I dunno."

"Come on." He pokes me gently in the stomach. "You always know what you're gonna do."

I shake my head. "I really don't. I should take the lit review class, it's the only sensible course. But..."

"But you don't want to."

"It's a hell of an opportunity."

"Maybe Morty would wait until the summer?"

I shake my head. "Maybe, but not likely. I mean, by the summer they're gonna want to be rolling already. They really need help watching film for the draft. I could maybe latch on in the fall, go to the games with him..." My voice trails off.

"You don't think he'd let you?"

I lean against him. "Who knows? I have the opportunity now. I don't know if I'll ever have it again. I showed him something at the combine, but if I can't commit to the internship, I'm not sure I'll get another chance. He said it himself, there are kids lining up for this job."

Something changes. His expression assumes an intensity I've only seen a few times. When we first met, when he didn't know what was going on or why he was attracted to a male fox, he had that same ferocious determination in his narrowed eyes, his flared nostrils, his exposed teeth. Also, that time he threw me in the closet. This time, though, it's not directed at me.

"Hundred grand, huh?"

"Something like that. You okay, stud?"

The paw on my stomach presses down. "Listen," he says. "Work with the Dragons. When I get drafted, I'll pay off your loans."

I cover up shock with flippancy. "*When* you get drafted. Who went

and made you all confident?"

He leans closer to me, his breath hot on my whiskers. "I mean it. You helped me last year. If I do get drafted it'll be because of you."

"Back to if," I say. "Anything you get from playing football is because of you."

"No." He glares down at me, shifting his weight to pin me where I am. "If I watched my life like game film, I'd see me kinda drifting around. You know, always good enough to make the team, never good enough to stand out. Until last year. Then I'd see me suddenly motivated, making plays, trying hard." His nose bumps mine. "That's because of you."

"Morty calls that 'flipping a switch'," I say.

"Yeah, well, you flipped my switch good," he says. I'm awash in his breath, his scent, the power of his presence.

I tease his sheath and grin. "I could feel it."

He growls, smiling. "I'm serious, doc. You go for that Dragons job. If your parents really make you pay your own expenses, I'll cover 'em."

I kiss him. Relief, not just from a financial burden, but from the necessity of having to make the decision, fills me as warmly as he did just a little while ago. "Thanks," I say. "You realize that if I get this job, it's thanks to you."

"Which is thanks to you."

"But you did the work."

We argue about this for a little while, until he puts a stop to it to start something else.

Having made the decision, it's easy to avoid my parents' phone calls. I feel almost giddy with excitement and defiance as I put the paperwork through to drop the lit review course, and explain what I'm doing over lunch with Jason, at his insistence. (At the Green Parlour. Definitely gay.) He's disappointed, but he respects my decision. More importantly, he signs the form for me and, after I hint around a bit, says he'll talk to Schruft. I figure since it looks like I won't be graduating, I don't really need to talk to him any more. He asks if I'm still planning to graduate sometime, and I say yeah, I want to. He gives me his number and says to keep in touch, and goes off to class.

I sit there a little while longer. I expect the tension and stress to melt away now that the deed is done, now that my paws have started down the

path. Instead, I can't help but think about what my parents will say. I don't care what they have to say, I tell myself, but then it's just me talking to myself, a voice I want to shut up but can't. Three and a half years of work, the pride I put into all of it, discarded for a shot at this job. Is it worth it? Doubts gnaw at my gut. I want to run after Jason and tell him to tear up the form. I could call him; I actually take out my cell phone and program in his number, but I don't hit Talk. I just look at it and then I take a breath and put the phone away and walk through the quad.

So I'm not going to graduate. I've done most of the work, but I won't have the degree. It's okay, I remind myself, because I can feel my hackles rising. I can always go back and finish it later. People do it all the time, taking semesters and even full years off.

But still. This is the first thing, the first big thing I've started and not finished. I've quit. That word, when it hits my mind, freezes me in my tracks. It's something my father would say—will say, no doubt, when that inevitable conversation rolls around. No matter how you sniff it, it's the scent of quitting. Quitting to do something better, absolutely. Will that make a difference? Probably not.

I make my way back to my room, slowly, feeding the guilty ache inside me with more self-flagellation. Had I really tried as hard as I could to make both the Dragons and Schruft happy? Or had I just bolted for the football job, abandoning the course that was more difficult? I've taken pride in everything I've done at college because it was hard work, not skating through like Allen or some of my other friends, not avoiding difficult things.

I pass the computer lab where I've been doing research on prospects, and that just makes me more depressed. So many stories, testaments to the power of persistence, overcoming horrendous obstacles to become highly-touted players. The coyote from the wideout trials, the one with the sculpted fur, I've been following as my own pet project. He grew up in a Peco slum. His older sister died of a drug overdose. His father tore out his mother's throat. His aunt took him in; she died of cancer. He's dyslexic. He was put into remedial classes for five years until someone thought to give him the right kind of test. And on, and on, and on. He'll be graduating in the top ten percent of his class, and he's gotten better at his position every year he's in college. He isn't on many draft boards—projected as a late-round pick at best—but if I have anything to say about it, he won't be a

twister.

So when I pass the lab, and I think of him, I feel like complete shit. Look at me: raised in the lap of luxury, never really had to work or want for much, and I can't even finish a goddamn liberal arts degree. I want to rip out clumps of fur as I turn onto the street where my apartment is.

Without seeing them, I get through the doors and into my room. The bookshelves look dusty in the afternoon light. I start toward them and then veer off to sit by the bed, just staring at the titles. No matter how rocky my relationship with each one might have been at the start, by the time our classes were done they'd become old friends. Now they scorn me silently from their corner, telling me they have no more use for me.

I have two messages on the machine and nobody I want to talk to. I have to get ready to go to work in half an hour.

Not wanting to weigh him down with my self-indulgent guilt, nor wanting to hear his excuses for me, I avoid Dev for a few days. The combination of his growing insistence plus my waning guilt finally leads to a Saturday night at my apartment, where despite all my best efforts just to get his clothes off, he insists on talking first.

"How's the job going?" he wants to know.

"Fine." I pull his boxers down, but he play-growls and pushes me down.

"Just 'fine'?"

I stare up at him, meeting his golden eyes. "Yeah, we look at film. I take notes on players."

He grins. "Been taking notes on me?"

"I know everything I need to know about you." I slide my arm under his and cup his balls, pressing the heel of my paw into his sheath.

"Mmmf. I'm serious."

"Me too." To prove it, I start rubbing, hard, getting him to respond.

He twists, landing on his side beside me and trapping me against him. "You're acting funny, Lee," he says. "What's goin' on?"

"This is acting funny?" I squeeze his sheath. "I'm not even wearing a dress."

"Doc," he says, "I won't outtalk ya. So I won't even try. But I know when somethin's wrong. It's like when I line up and the guy I'm covering is two feet inside where he usually is. It don't look right."

"Seems to me I'm right under center," I say. He's getting pretty hard. Another couple minutes and he'll give in, just let me let him fuck me, and after that he'll be sleepy and I'll leave early.

"Now I'm just more worried 'cause you won't tell me what it is." He's resting his free paw, the arm that's not wrapped around my chest, on my hip.

"Look, it's nothing you can do anything about," I say. My paw keeps working.

He nudges my ear. "So there is something."

Dammit. "It's nothing."

He purrs against me. "You just said it was something."

"I said it was nothing."

"Nothing I could do anything about. That's not the same as just nothing."

"That what they're teaching you in those gender studies classes, stud?" I find him mostly erect, tease my fingers along his shaft. Just forget about this, I mentally project at him.

Gently, he takes my paw from his sheath and holds it. "That's what you taught me."

It's not fair. He's supposed to get the physical dominance and I get the verbal dominance. I feel petulant and put-upon. "I don't want to talk," I say tightly. "I just wanna fuck." I spit the word out as a challenge.

He looks at me for a long moment and then rolls away from me on the bed. "I'm kinda tired."

I lie there, absorbing his words and considering the possibilities. Part of me aches to roll over and curl up against him and tell him how scared I am of what I'm doing. But I can't do that, because I'm not even sure what the hell is going on, and he'll just reassure me that when he gets drafted, he'll help me out financially. I won't be able to convey to him what's bothering me, because mostly it has nothing to do with him. It's all about me, how I took the easy path and what that makes me. He'll look at me and say, *I don't understand*, and I can already feel the surge of frustration at him. So I cut to the chase and say, "Fine." I sit up on the bed, gather my clothes. He doesn't say a word the whole time I'm getting dressed, not even when I pause at the door and look back at the bed. I catch a muffled sniffing noise, that's all. Then again, that might just be snoring.

I walk around the city for half an hour. The all-night coffee shop is

closed. The only thing open is a 24-hour convenience store, empty except for a porcupine behind the register, looking half-stoned. So I get some terrible coffee and linger by the magazine rack until the porcupine gets nervous, staring openly at me. Fine, I think, fuck you too. If I were going to rob this shithole, I'd have done it already.

Dev's car is gone from the street when I get back. I'd worked myself up to confront him, or maybe apologize, and I'm mad at him for taking the choice away from me, and also relieved that I won't have to deal with it tonight. I'm still replaying the last half hour in my head, walking around my room, so I'm already undressed and ready for bed when I notice the blinking light on my answering machine. Because I'm still worked up (in a different way), my first thought is that it's Dev calling to apologize and ask me to come back over. So I play the message.

Hi, Wiley. Just wanted to let you know that Dad and I booked our flight to come see your graduation. She follows with details of the arrival times and where they're going to stay, but the words just roll over and around me. They've already bought their tickets. Why on earth are they flying? It's only a four hour drive.

I feel like calling them up right now, even though it's past midnight, to say, "Sorry, you'd better cancel those tickets. Just put the couple hundred dollars on my tab. I'll never notice it." But they're asleep, and if I call tonight I will have to talk to them again tomorrow, and I'm not going to let myself in for that. I have to work tomorrow. I pull the sheets over my head and try, unsuccessfully, to sleep.

Dev doesn't call, that night or the next, which is perfectly normal for him. He knows me well enough to let me alone when I'm grouchy. Still, because I'm grouchy, I *want* him to call me so I can tell him I don't want to talk to him. It's not a good thing that I don't have classes in the morning anymore. I have breakfast, mope, have lunch, mope, and then go to work, where Morty doesn't say anything about my attitude but I'm painfully aware of it and can't do anything about it.

By the third day, it's dawned on me that if I continue to be grumpy at the Dragons' office, I might well ruin my chance to make that work, too. I'm not sure what to do about that, but "something other than what I'm currently doing" seems to be in order. Going to see Dev would entail facing a lot of crap I'm still not in the mood to face, so that leaves going out. Alone, because I don't want to inflict my state of mind on any

unsuspecting friends, especially ones I haven't seen in weeks or months.

It's not pure happenstance that I run into Salim that evening. I've deliberately gone out, leaving the cell phone in my room, to a place where Dev and I don't usually go. My paws, diverted from those familiar haunts, wandered back in my memory to Kitteridge's Cafe, where I order the plate of meatloaf and think sourly as it lies in my stomach that whoever called it 'comfort food' had never had it here. Then again, you go to Goose's for the meatloaf. You come to Kitteridge's for the coffee, the company, or the ambiance. It's dimly lit, but those of us with a *tapetum lucidum* can still read the postcards papering the walls, sent back by students and alumni alike. Everyone loves to test their "we'll put up anything" policy, sometimes by sending profanity-laced postcards of Forester's own campus. Haley, the owner, puts them all up and even dedicated a small panel to them, which he calls "Cussin' Corner."

Kitteridge's is an old FLAG hangout. Even though it's not a meeting night, I should have known—maybe I did—that I'd run into one of them here. Of all of them, I'm glad it's Salim.

He comes up behind me and says in that polite, accented voice, "Wiley. It's nice to see you."

I twist to see him, and smile. "Hi, Salim. How've you been?"

He shrugs. "Senior year. And yourself?"

My gut twists, with some difficulty, around the meatloaf. "Not so much."

He cocks his head. "No?"

I open my muzzle, shut it again, then consider him. It's been over half a year since we had a real talk, probably two months since I saw him at a casual, boisterous dinner. I remember how comfortable I was talking to him now, and marvel that I could've forgotten it. "You have anywhere you need to be?"

He sits across from me while I give him the nutshell. He congratulates me on the Dragons job, then listens quietly as I tell him about Schruft and quitting school. "So," I say, "that's it. I quit. School's done."

"They let you use the computer labs?"

I grin. It's such an inane question, but it's so Salim. "I guess they haven't been told to kick me out yet."

"What did your parents say?"

I shrug. "Nothing they can do about it now."

He inclines his head. "Worried your boyfriend will not be selected to play?"

"A little," I admit. "But he's got a good chance."

He nods. "There are many things to be worrying about, but it's nice that school isn't one of them, at least. I have to complete this factory design by next week and the rest of my group seem to think some magical spirit is going to come do the work for us."

Talking to him about his school issues, marvellously, eases my tension. I promise to call him more often, since he is the only one of my friends to have met Dev. We share a piece of butterscotch apple tart a la mode while he asks me more about the Dragons job, and then about what it's like to be done with school.

"It doesn't feel complete," I admit. "I still walk around feeling like I should have schoolwork."

"Like a phantom limb," he says.

I chuckle. "Yeah. Kind of like that." A lot like that, now that I think about it.

"Well," he says, "one treatment that has proven effective is a mirror box."

"A what?"

He tucks one paw under his arm and holds up both arms. "It is a box that tricks the patient with mirrors. It appears to him as though his left arm is his right, and right is left. So when he moves both arms, he thinks he sees the phantom limb moving."

I raise an eyebrow. "And that helps?"

His little shoulders shrug as he unfolds his arms. "It appears so."

"The mind is a tricky thing." I sip what's left of my water.

"Never underestimate the power of the mind."

I chuckle and nod. "What is mind?"

"Doesn't matter," he flips back immediately. "What is matter?"

"Never mind." We share a chuckle at our TV quote, but in the back of my head I'm thinking about what he said. It sounds silly. Doesn't it?

Unburdened by schoolwork, I stay after he has to leave to work on his project. The coffee is terrific here, especially the house specialty, a cinnamon soy latte with a dark Mediterranean espresso shot. They make a canid version, with less of the sharp cinnamon powder for our sensitive noses, which is what I nurse as I look around the postcards. The further

you get from the coffee counter, the sparser the postcards become. It looks like Haley put up a new batch since the last time I was here, six months or so ago, so I wander over to look at them.

Someone went on a South Seas cruise. I can't read the name. A "Hirosaki" (first or last name?) sent a postcard from overseas. The description says, "The beautiful and majestic. Futaki is mountain of strength, signifying life." I turn it over, and the mountain lives up to its billing. Nice. There's another card from Josie in New South Upper Something. She shouts out to "the gals in block D." Another, of red outback dust dunes, has smudges of the real stuff on the back, turning the signature under the cheerful "A friendly native promised to deliver this!" into an unreadable blotch. Then I spot familiar handwriting, and crouch to read the card.

"I miss all you guys. The coffee here sucks. Shoot an espresso for me, and be nice." It's signed, "B. D." That's Brian, his little nickname for himself that nobody else ever used, after a famous comic strip character. I touch the postcard, catching a faint trace of skunk scent. It was posted nine months ago, the start of Brian's first year in his new college, and sure enough, that's what's pictured on the other side: a red brick building with "Stubbaker Hall" in yellow floofy script slapped over the image.

I drop the card and straighten. "Be nice," something the FLAG group used to say to each other, from the little sticker that says "Mean people suck; nice people swallow." An inside joke, a desperate attempt to tell us he's still part of our group even though he's miles away, even though he ran from his problems here and left us to face them.

Sort of the same way I'm running, I think, but of course it's not like that at all, is it? He was running away; I'm running toward. At least, I think I am. I sit back down and sip at my latte, looking around at all the postcards. I hate holding Brian up as a yardstick, but if I think of it, we were so similar, up until that night he got himself beaten up. He quit after that, ran off to a safe place and only came back to stalk me when he was afraid I wasn't carrying on his legacy for him.

I take the latte out to the sidewalks, heading home, but the memories follow me. Was that all there was to it? Did Brian really care about me, and I was so wrapped up in Dev and my life here that I just kicked him to the side? I think of the easy nights we shared, the good times and the conversations, and I wonder if maybe he would understand what I'm going

through right now. I know I shouldn't call him, but staring at his handwriting took me back forcefully. Even talking to Salim, who never knew Brian well, reminds me of the skunk.

When we talked over Christmas, I remember being angry, but he's respected my privacy since then. I want to spend more time with Salim, but he's busy, and I can't call my tiger, not yet, not while I still might blow up because I'm not sure what the hell I'm feeling. Brian's an expert at that. He always used to tell me what I'm feeling.

So I look up his number when I get home and call, though I dial from the room phone, not the cell. I tell myself it's about minutes and cost, but really it's because I don't want him to have that number. It makes my fur prickle, to want to talk but to maintain that distance, but I put it out of my head. Brian always did say I thought too much.

"You're thinking too much," he says when I've told him I'm plexing about dropping out. "You got offered a job with the freaking Dragons and you're worried about your English degree? Especially with Schruft. I told you not to pick him as your advisor."

"Who was I going to go with?"

"Uh, anyone else?"

"Like it's that easy."

"Tippy," he says, "it's only as hard as you make it."

And there it is, cutting to the heart of it. It would be perfect if he just left that phrase where it is, but of course, being Brian, he has to add, "or as hard as your all-star Neanderthal jock makes it."

I try not to sound as irritated as I feel. "Jesus, leave him out of it."

"Seriously, what are you going to do when he doesn't get drafted? For that matter, what are you going to do if he *does* get drafted?"

"What makes you think he won't get drafted?"

"What makes you think he will?"

"What makes you think it matters?" The verbal sparring takes me back years.

"Why did you break up with Allen?"

"Why did *you* break up with Allen?"

He takes a critic's tone. "His lovemaking was the high point of the relationship. In public, he often seemed to forget that we were attached and lost the thread of the relationship narrative."

I can't help but be amused. "He was good in bed, yeah."

"The second most important thing to you."

"Well, I broke up with him because he was cheating on me. So, fidelity comes first?"

"Ennnh! Thank you for playing our game."

"Like you know me so well." The amusement's fading. I'd forgotten that when Brian told me what I was feeling, he was insufferable about it.

"Hey, three years spending most of our time together," he says. "Allen cheated on you before that and you stayed with him."

"Yeah, and I told him if he cheated again I'd break up with him. He did, I did, we stayed friends. End of story."

"Not quite." Now he's taking the denouement detective tone. "Because there was one other thing that had changed, wasn't there, Mister Farrel? When you began dating him, Allen was the secretary of the prestigious Student Activities Council, was he not?"

"I guess he was." I'd forgotten that.

"And when you broke up?"

It comes back to me slowly. "His term was over. He was thinking about running for president but decided not to."

"Against your advice."

"My advice? I just told him he had a good opportunity to do some good. He decided he'd rather spend time working with FLAG."

"And then you broke up with him."

I get the connection now. "And you think I broke up with him because he wasn't going to be president."

"You've always been attracted to power, Tip."

"Isn't everyone?"

"So... when your jock is just a has-been former college semi-star, will you still looooooove him?"

"Love doesn't end when the curtain falls, Brian. And it's none of your business anyway."

"Our friendship is my business," he says. "Since he took you away..."

"You took you away," I say. "Can we drop it?"

He shifts immediately to contrition. "I just miss this, is all."

I press the phone to my ear. It's a poor substitute for the talks we used to have. "Me too," I say.

There's a pause while, I'm sure, he's searching for something to say that isn't about Dev. "So, the freakin' Dragons," is what he comes up with.

"Y'ever run into Cog Williams around the offices?"

"Sure, they keep him around in case they're desperate for a quarterback." Feeding him a line, which he pounces on.

"Then why didn't they defrost him this year?" We laugh.

"What," I say, "you don't like that new kid, with the interceptions?"

"At least he doesn't fumble."

"No, Tarmudge takes care of that for him."

"What a loyal fan you are."

I take a second to decide how to answer that. "To teams that have earned my loyalty."

I know he catches the subtext, but he switches subjects smoothly.

"Hey, can you get me into McLauden?"

"During a game? Sure, buy a ticket."

He snorts. "I mean, like, behind the scenes."

"We'll see how it goes."

I can hear him roll his eyes. "I'm not going to mention your precious tiger."

I sit on the bed, my tail curled beside me, and lean back into the pillow. "That's a good start."

"There's nobody here I can talk to. You wouldn't believe the fucking monkeys in this place. I can't wait to wave good-bye to this two-bit town."

Tactfully, he doesn't mention that he will be graduating. "Where you headed?"

"Maybe Hilltown. I dunno, the 'rents are retiring to Chevali next year. Maybe they'll spring for a place down there."

"You're their precious flower. I'm sure you have but to ask."

"Closer to Hollywood, too. You know, in case I completely sell out."

"What, you, Spotty? Go out of your way for attention? It is to laugh."

"Ouch! Just what are you insinuating?"

I grin, lean back, and close my eyes. As long as he doesn't mention Dev, it's almost like old times. Almost. There's still something extra, a needy edge to him that wasn't there before and is a little unsettling coming from the formerly brash, confident skunk.

Hanging up, though, I still feel worlds better. Not just because I had a nice talk with him, but also because I can put things into a better context. Brian ran away from here because that's the sort of person he is: over-confident and over-compensating, and when that confidence was shattered,

he couldn't deal with it. So he took off.

That's not what I'm doing now. I'm quitting school, yeah, but I let that get into my head too much. I'm quitting because I have a boyfriend and the chance of a lifetime, and even if my parents try to saddle me with a hundred grand in debt, there's nothing I'd rather be doing than sitting in the Dragons' office watching film with Morty, sharing insights.

Okay, that's not true. There is one thing.

Halfway to his place, I call. "I've decided to stop being a prick," I say. "For now."

"That's good news." His guarded tone relaxes.

I'm walking along the street in front of the coffee shop, away from it, past the small bookstore and the head shop. "I wasn't mad at you."

"Are you now?"

I have to smile. "No. I mean... the other night, it was about something else." He doesn't say anything. "I think I'm ready to talk about it. If you have time to listen."

"I have this Gender Studies paper I'm working on."

I picture his offhanded shrug, the smile that he tries to hide when he doesn't want to seem too eager about something. "Maybe I could help you study."

"It's not a sexual positions paper."

"See, I told you you should've taken that sexual positions class. You'd have aced it."

Now, finally, I get a chuckle. "Where are you?"

I look up. "Fourth and Norwood. Right by that coffee shop that has your picture up on the wall."

"The big national chain? The one with the green sign?"

"Yeah."

"What's their name again?"

He thinks it's funny that I dislike Starbucks so much. "Warm Piss In An Overpriced Cup."

"Right, right." He pauses, while I cross the street. "Are you going to your place?"

"I thought I might come over there. If that's okay."

"Here?"

"Yeah. You want me to bring you any Warm Piss?"

"You'd go in there for me?"

"Just to get the cup."

It takes him a minute, and then he laughs. "You're disgusting. No, I'm okay."

"See you soon."

I double back and get him a big latte with extra sugar syrup anyway. He smiles when I hand it to him, right as he opens the door. "Gee, thanks," he says. "Couldn't wait to use the restroom?"

"Waste not, want not." We stand for a minute and look into each other's eyes, me tilting my head back, we're standing so close. Then he puts a paw on my shoulder and guides me over to the extra chair by his desk. He sits in his chair. I drop into the spare and look around. The surroundings are just what I would have expected, but still, the reality of them takes a moment to sink in. The desk next to a mostly-bare bookshelf, his laptop open to an essay amidst schoolbooks. Clothes on the floor, the open door to the bathroom showing a wet towel draped across the sink and clumps of orange and black fur, visible even at this distance. The open door to the bedroom, the outline of a big double bed just visible in the shadows beyond. The living room is too brightly lit for my night vision to see any further inside, but I know what it looks like. I helped pick it out.

I wait for him to ask, but he just takes a drink of his latte. I take a breath. "This whole quitting school thing is really hard for me."

He nods. "I get that part."

"It's because it's all tied up in who I am." I look out the window. He has a nice view of the elm trees along Beechwood. "I never quit anything before. I never even quit reading a book halfway through."

"Really?"

"Well, nothing important. And now... I'm not graduating. I'll be like one of those guys you see on the news where the reporter says, *"of course, he never graduated from college,"* and shakes his head."

He tilts his muzzle. "Like professional football players?"

"Kind of." I look back at him, indicate the computer on his desk "You're going to graduate."

He snorts. "It'd be hard not to." Then he sees the effect that remark has on me, and he reaches out. "Sorry."

"No, you're right. It would be hard not to." I let his paw cover mine anyway.

We're quiet after that. He squeezes my paw, and I know he's trying to

put together what to say. I think about how Brian would never have let this much silence go by, and how nice it is.

"I dunno everything about you, Lee," Dev says, leaning forward. "Like, why this is a huge deal. I mean, I get the parents and everything. But it's like you were telling me about the combine, right? Just because I didn't do my absolute best there doesn't change what I can do. It's a snapshot, didn't you say that?"

"It's a pretty important snapshot," I say. "This is college. This is what sticks with you for the rest of your life. It's what proves..." I hear what I'm about to say, and snap my muzzle shut.

Fox love him, Dev hears it too. "What?" he says. "Proves you're smart?"

"Proves that you can decide on a course of study, dedicate yourself, pursue it through to the end, and finish it. Accomplish something. That you're going to be a worthwhile contributor to society."

He raises an eyebrow. "That you're smart."

"It's more than that," I start to say, but my own protests just sound like posturing to me now. I look around his unpretentious apartment, where the only books in the room are his schoolbooks, where the posters on the wall are sports figures unadulterated by movie posters or quotes from famous physicists. The scent in the room is all him, power and youth. Dev is what he is, unashamed and wholeheartedly. Coming back from my quick glance to his golden eyes, focused on me, I remember that that is one of the things I love about him. He's waiting for me to elaborate, but I just say, "Yeah. That I'm smart."

He nods. "How many kids do you think want to work for the Dragons?"

"Dev."

He holds up a paw. "How many?"

I shrug. "All of them, I think."

"So. They asked you." He doesn't take his eyes off me. He got this way when Brian was bothering us, too. It's a strange feeling, his wanting to protect me like this. I feel like I'm the one who should be looking out for him, precisely because he is so earnestly himself, but there's something strangely attractive about letting him look out for me. It's the same kind of attractive that sits at the bottom of a drink: it's fine as long as I know my limit. I'm not there yet.

"Yeah. Thanks to you." He starts to protest. "I know, I know. You're right."

"Damn right I am." He stands up, grasps my paws, and pulls me to my feet. "In my book, that makes you pretty smart. No matter what your parents think."

I stiffen, and not in a good way. "You really want to bring up my parents now?"

His arms surround me and pull me closer. Our noses touch. I inhale the warmth of his breath. "Sorry," he says with a grin. "I meant to say, you're the smartest guy I know."

I brush his lips with mine, the tickle of fur soft between us. "Dev," I say, you mostly know football players."

"And coach," he says, but it's playful, baiting me.

I slide my muzzle along his and brush our whiskers together. "Coach," I say, "is a perfect illustration of the saying, 'Those who can't do, teach.' He wishes he were smart enough to be a football player. He doesn't even have any idea what he needs to do to get you ready for the UFL beyond running more drills and working out more."

His paws knead my back. "Lucky I have you."

"You sure are." And while we're kissing, an idea comes to me. Dev is my mirror box, the project I should be investing my energy in. Rather than dissecting 19th century literature, I'll work towards a real goal. I've been helping him out some already, but of course there's more I could be doing. "Oh," I say, pulling my muzzle back, "you need to get on a social network."

He blinks, looking genuinely hurt. "Is my kissing that bad?"

I laugh. "The teams—they have me looking at all those networks to find out what I can about the character of the prospects. So you need to get on and establish your character."

His paws grip my rear with the same surety they would a football. "Right now?"

I trace my tongue up his chin, over his lips, to his nose. "No," I say, "not *right* now."

Afterwards, though, I help get him set up on some of the networks I've been watching for Morty. We spend a good two hours on it, and actually have a great time. "There are two hundred and forty-three other tigers who play football on FriendNet?"

"Play football' could mean anything," I tell him. "Could mean flag football once a year with the family."

"Could it mean video game football?"

"There's a separate tag for video games, but yeah, it could." I grin. "Or if they're not American, it could mean soccer."

"Even video soccer?" "Even table soccer."

He nudges me. "I play table soccer. Put that in too."

"You spin the guys."

"That's how you play!"

I snort, typing it in. "That's how *you* play."

"Just 'cause you can't beat me..."

"Come on down to Smokey's and play pool with me sometime."

He shakes his head. "Oh, wait, though. If you teach me to play pool, I could list that too. That's good, right? The more things, the better?"

"There are limits." I search for more tags. "I'm not sure whether playing pool is a good thing or not."

"Good paw-eye coordination?"

We go on like that for over an hour. By the end of it I realize that even though we've barely said anything, we've said enough. I'm feeling good enough to go out to dinner with him, good enough to stay in and watch a movie, good enough to sleep in his bed for the first time and wake up at his place for the first morning. For some reason, that both bothers me and relieves me. There's a nagging edge to it, that I'm now depending on him (*because I couldn't finish college*), but the intimacy of being here is enough to override that. I suppose I could thank Brian for helping me relax enough to get my head on straight, but given the context, I doubt he'd appreciate the credit.

We go out to breakfast, talking more about what he can do to appear attractive to teams. It's a good talk, as long as I shut down the part of my brain that asks what's going to happen to our relationship when he gets drafted, immersed in the hyper-masculine homophobic world of pro sports. That's months away; in the present, he's here with me.

Until he goes to class. Then I go back to the computer lab and do some more research for the Dragons. Dev offered me the use of his laptop, but using his machine to do team work feels like a conflict of interest to me. Anyway, I kind of like the computer lab, sitting amidst the other students. Eventually, they'll pull my computer access and I'll have to do it all from

my home laptop, but for now I like being here, feeling as though I'm part of them and yet apart from them. My deadlines are at the same time more flexible and more important than theirs. I get my work done when it gets done, not when a professor tells me it's due (though the draft is there at the end of it); if I don't complete it, though, I get more than just a bad grade. The back of my mind is pretty free while I'm doing this routine scanning, so I have a lot of time to think about this and decide that maybe it isn't all that bad. The question of what it says about me, what it means, is not going to be solved in a day, and that's a good thing.

By the time I get back to my place, I'm feeling more at peace than I have since I had the talk with Jason. This is my course, this is my life, and Dev is right. I need to focus on what I'm doing, not what I haven't done or can't do. Stepping back into my apartment, with the books on my shelves and the draft of an essay I'd printed out still on my desk, I feel a twinge of the depression return, but I quell it easily. After all, I need to go to work. I try to take a page from Dev's book and just focus on being me, not worrying about all the existential and practical implications of what it means to be me, hyper-aware of each little part that makes up the composite.

Now, if Dev could only do something about my parents.

They arrive two days after I get an ego-boosting pat on the back from Morty, at a dinner out for the whole team. With the draft three weeks away, things have shifted into overdrive, and my insecurities about quitting school have not so much been resolved as shelved. I come into the office for full days now, three times staying the night, so the positives of not having classes are blindingly apparent. The negatives of the whole thing are boiled down to one: less time with Dev. Since my first visit to his apartment, I've spent the night once more and he's spent the night at my place twice, about a quarter of our previous three-times-a-week average. He's keeping busy as well, not just with his classes but with physical workouts, with maintaining his online presence, and with calls from agents.

There aren't many. The ones he lets me hear on his answering machine sound desperate, like Morty without a steady job. Dev narrows his choices down to two, asking my help in choosing between them. I'm not a lot of help; when I call them as "a concerned friend," they assume I'm a relative of some sort and they ooze unctuous charm without giving any information

at all. What we do get out of them is the names of some of their other clients, though they won't give contact information. By luck, one of them happens to be on the Dragons, a third-string defensive lineman. I'm able to wheedle his cell number from Morty to give to Dev. I'm not around when Dev makes the call, but by the time of the pre-draft dinner out, Dev has settled on that agent to represent him, a weasel named Hal Ogleby.

But that's receded pretty far from my mind on the day after the dinner, when mostly I'm feeling headache and wobbly, and it's not on my mind at all when Dev takes me to dinner that night at Goose's. I'm snappish and nervous, but to his credit he realizes it's not at him. After a couple minutes, so do I, so I start snapping about my parents, trying to be funny and mostly failing. Example: "Maybe if I tell them I'm a failure right when they get here, it'll cut out all that awkward 'conversation' stuff they're going to want to do." Or: "I'm sure they'll still love me even if I don't graduate. It'll just be the kind of love like you have for someone who's crushed every hope and dream you ever had for them." To which Dev says, "Like rooting for the Dragons," and I have to laugh and tell him he isn't allowed to be funnier than me in front of my parents.

"They think you're funny?" he asks.

"Don't you?"

"Well, sure." He grins into his drink and lowers his voice. "But I don't think you joke with them like you joke with me."

"I don't." I shove a piece of chicken meatloaf around my plate. "And you're right, they probably don't."

"So I'm going to get to meet them? You decided?"

I nod. "Course. There wasn't ever a question. I just hope you still want to be with me after you see where I came from. And when you see where they want to eat. I guarantee it'll be P.J.'s."

"They can't be that bad," he says. "They raised you."

"Most of what I am I became in college," I say. "You might not believe this, but I was kind of a prick in high school."

"You're still kind of a prick," he says. I flick my ears at him, not wanting to rise to the bait. He sees it and says, "It's okay, though. You're my prick."

"I thought I was just a place to put yours," I say.

That makes him laugh. "See," he says, "you should just be funny like that with your parents."

I glare across the table, but can't keep from cracking a smile. "Let's get them to meet you first and work our way up to the smutty jokes."

He shrugs. I know he's thinking about telling his family, and how and when and where and how in the hell he's going to do it. His mom would just be in complete denial, but he has no idea how his father would react. His father's always been this paragon of masculinity — played football in high school, works in a garage, subscribes to porno magazines — and Dev spent a lot of his childhood trying to live up to him. His family had this whole weird attitude about football, that it was a must-have for high school, but that he shouldn't be wasting his time on it in college. I don't think his father went to college, because he sees it as a place where Dev should be getting skills so he can "do better than his old man." He knows about college football, of course, and Dev's last stunning year seems to have quieted that talk, but before that he seemed to think of college football as something you watched on Saturdays, not something his kid participated in. Now he's got the same roadblock with the UFL, where he just can't believe they'd pick Dev, can't place his kid in that same bracket with Russell and Kinnic (names he knows). But none of that is because he doesn't think of Dev as all male. 'All male,' in his mind, being basically someone who likes cars, sports, and females of his own species, in any order.

At least my parents are okay with me being gay. At least I have that much. They still don't want to meet Dev, but they're going to.

Not right away, of course. I don't meet them at the airport, because they're going to rent a car and they said they'll come by my apartment and pick me up. They call from the airport, and again from the rental car counter, and this time I answer my cell phone, keeping the conversation bland: "Doing fine," and "See you soon." From the time I woke up and realized they were already in the air, I've been flagellating myself for letting things get to this point. I should've just told them, let them cancel the plane ticket and be mad at me far away, where I wouldn't have to worry about it. Now I have to figure out how to tell them in person, watching both their reactions as I do.

Of course, we have dinner at P.J. McGovern's, the only restaurant near campus that they approve of. The one time I talked them into Goose's, they said it was "interesting," and later my father told me Mother'd had diarrhea ("your mother didn't enjoy the food there, during or after the meal"). I put

off conversation by pretending to be buried in the menu, but once I've ordered the roast beef sandwich and the drinks have arrived, I can't really postpone things any longer.

"We got the schedule," my mother says. She's dressed formally, in a yellow satin dress with fancy gold trim. My first thought when I see it is that I bet I'd look good in it. "We're so excited. I saw they have a place for parents to stand during the march. You'll wave to us, won't you?"

"No," I say.

"We know how difficult this last semester's been for you," my father says. He's wearing a nice business casual shirt and slacks, no tie. "You'll see, someday, that finishing your coursework was the best thing for you to do."

"We're very proud of you," Mother says softly.

I look from one to the other. "Been practicing your palliatives?"

I say. They exchange glances. "Look," Father says, after a breath, "I know we were a little harsh. It's because we love you."

"Tough love," I say.

"Yes," Mother says brightly. She lifts the menu from the table. "We can argue about it later. Today's a happy day. Let's just enjoy it." Her ears are up, pearl earrings gleaming in the restaurant's lights. This is one of those places with the travel theme, the fake artifacts not plastered all over like at the T.G.I. Friday's, but tastefully arranged for effect. The menu has fake postcards on the front, and the entrees have names like "Yorkshire Beef Sandwich" and "Croque Monsieur," for that world-traveler feel without the kitschiness of a Friday's or an Adventure Burger.

"Actually," I say, throwing all my prepared remarks out, "it's not a happy day."

Their ears go up immediately, the smiles gone as though mailed to Yorkshire. My father catches on first. "You'd better not mean what I think you mean."

"I think I do," I say, pressed back against the wooden back of my chair. My tail, fed through the tail-space, is curled tightly up under the seat. "But it depends on what you think I mean."

"Don't bullshit me, Wiley," my father says, his voice an ominous growl. "Are you graduating today?"

My wit dries up. My sheath is trying to crawl up into my abdomen. The wood grain of the table is intensely fascinating. Slowly, I shake my

head from side to side.

I hear my mother's inhaled squeak. I don't hear any reaction from my father. We sit there in the longest silence I've ever had to endure, until my mother breaks it, anguished, "We flew all the way here! Why didn't you tell us?"

"How could I?" Now I look up at them, from one to the other. "After that phone call... and then you just bought the plane tickets without asking."

My father's paw is clenched into a fist. There's a small streak of grey down his thumb, startling against the black. I don't remember seeing it there before. I wonder if he's going to hit me. "I thought, after that talk, that we were clear."

"You were clear. You assumed..."

"We assumed you'd do the sensible thing." His voice, slightly raised, makes heads turn. He shakes off my mother's look. "I guess we overestimated you."

"Well, I guess so," I say sullenly.

"Maybe you can help us understand what the hell is going through your head." He lowers his voice a little, enough to mollify my mother.

"It just doesn't make sense, Wiley," she says. "You pass up the chance at a good education."

"I've gotten a good education. The only thing I didn't get is a piece of paper telling me that I got a good education."

"You think that's just as good?" My father leans forward. "Without that piece of paper, you might as well have gotten nothing. And that's what we're paying for."

"You made that perfectly clear," I say. "I'll pay back my loans."

"How are you going to do that without a degree?" my father demands. "By working for free for a football team?"

"For your information, they're going to recommend me for a job," I throw back at him.

"Really," he says archly. "What kind of job?"

The sarcasm shuts my muzzle more effectively than threats could. "What's the difference?" I say to my root beer, low.

"We're interested, Wiley, really." But Mother's voice is disappointed, dulled.

"Yes, tell us your grand scheme for paying back your loans."

Once my boyfriend is drafted, I want to say, then he'll give me the money. He'll take care of me. But I can't make myself say the words. "I'm going to do it, okay? Just send me the bill, or the paperwork, or whatever."

I can hear them fidgeting around the table. I'm sure they can hear my claws scratching at its underside. Finally, my father lets out a long sigh. "So why did you let us fly all the way here? You couldn't tell us over the phone?"

The thought of Dev is still in my head, and so I grasp at it. "I want you to meet my boyfriend." I say the word loudly, deliberately. The skunk at the next table turns slightly, her ears perked. The coyote who's bringing our food pauses with the plates halfway to the table, then puts on his professional smile and sets them down. We fidget silently and shake our heads when he asks if we need anything else... Mother's paws fiddle with the silverware. She doesn't look at either of us.

Father adjusts his glasses. "I don't think this is really the time or place," he says. "And keep your voice down."

"Do you see him here?" I look around, melodramatically. There's a tiger at the bar, and for a moment I think about saying that that's Dev, just to freak them out. "You're so concerned about my life, I'd think you'd want to meet him."

"But if you're not graduating," my mother says, "what are you going to do during the ceremony?"

My father and I look at her. "Don't change the subject," I say.

"We might say the same to you," Father says.

"Well, what do you want me to say? It's done, it's over. I can't go back and make up five credits this afternoon so I can march tomorrow."

Mother picks apart her sandwich before eating it. I'm not really all that hungry, so I ignore the smell of my roast beef and spear one of the steamed veggies. It tastes boiled and could use salt, or pepper, or anything. Father cuts up his chicken strips. "We just want to know that you have a plan," he says.

"You don't want to know that I have a plan," I say. "You want to know that I have your plan."

"No," Father says in that reasonable voice that I hate. "If you have another plan that's going to work, that's fine."

"You've heard my plan," I say. "I'm going to work for the Dragons. I'm going to pay you back for my education."

"That's not really a plan." He starts eating the chickens strips, slowly, methodically. "It's a goal. How do you plan to accomplish that?"

I look at Mother, who's eating her sandwich and now looking at us again. "Well, I'd tell you, but it involves my boyfriend."

Predictably, she drops her eyes. Father says, "You think he's going to get drafted? Is that is? Then you'll just mooch off of him?"

"Mooch?" My gut's all knotted up. I couldn't eat the sandwich even if I were hungry. "Do people still talk like that?"

"What happens when you break up?"

"What makes you think we're going to break up?"

Father takes a breath. "Wiley, you're in college."

I can't resist. "Not any more."

He narrows his eyes. His ears go back. "You can't pin all your hopes to this tiger. You've been together how long now, six months?"

"A year." That's stretching it, but technically accurate.

"Oh, this sandwich is no good." Mother puts it down. "There's mayonnaise all over it."

"It's P.J.'s," I say. "There's mayo on everything."

"You're young," Father says. "We're just trying to protect you."

"Protecting me? From what, the catty remarks of the Vernaxes across the street?"

Now, Mother looks at us both. "Please, let's not fight."

"We're not fighting," Father says.

I raise an eyebrow and flick my ears back. "And you think I need relationship advice?"

"You're still young. You should be exploring relationships, not pinning all your future hopes on them."

"I wouldn't have to if you weren't giving me a hundred thousand dollars in debt to be responsible for." The skunk at the next table half-turns at that. Her ears are all the way back now, and her boyfriend is listening to us too.

"You wouldn't have that debt if you'd graduated!"

"Aren't parents supposed to love their kids no matter what?"

"We do love you," Mother protests.

Father leans across the table. "We know you're smart enough to graduate. I didn't raise you to be a quitter."

I push my chair back and stand up. "Well, you made some mistakes,

then, didn't you?"

"Sit down," he growls, his voice deep and slow. The skunks at the next table are openly staring. The coyote waiter stands about ten feet away at another table that's staring. Even some of the people at the bar have turned around. The tiger I noticed before, dressed in a fine grey suit and green tie, is walking away from the bar, but not looking at us.

"Really," I say, "I'm not hungry. I think I'll just head home." What else am I going to do but quit, walk away from things when they get too hard, right? That's my new thing.

My mother's looking up, her eyes wide as if she doesn't quite get what's going on. "Wiley Farrel," my father says, "if you know what's good for you, you'll sit down."

"Clearly, I don't," I say. My tail lashes against the chair. "If I did, I'd be graduating tomorrow. Introducing you to my girlfriend, a nice vixen who's polite and says the right things and is expecting to be married in the fall and pregnant next year. Like cousin Amy, right? That's how you wish I'd turned out."

"We love you the way you are," my mother says. My father doesn't say anything.

I turn to leave, but a scent catches my nose. "Dev?"

A heavy paw comes to rest on my shoulder: the tiger in the grey suit and green tie. I didn't even recognize him. "Lee," he says, "I thought you wanted me to meet your parents."

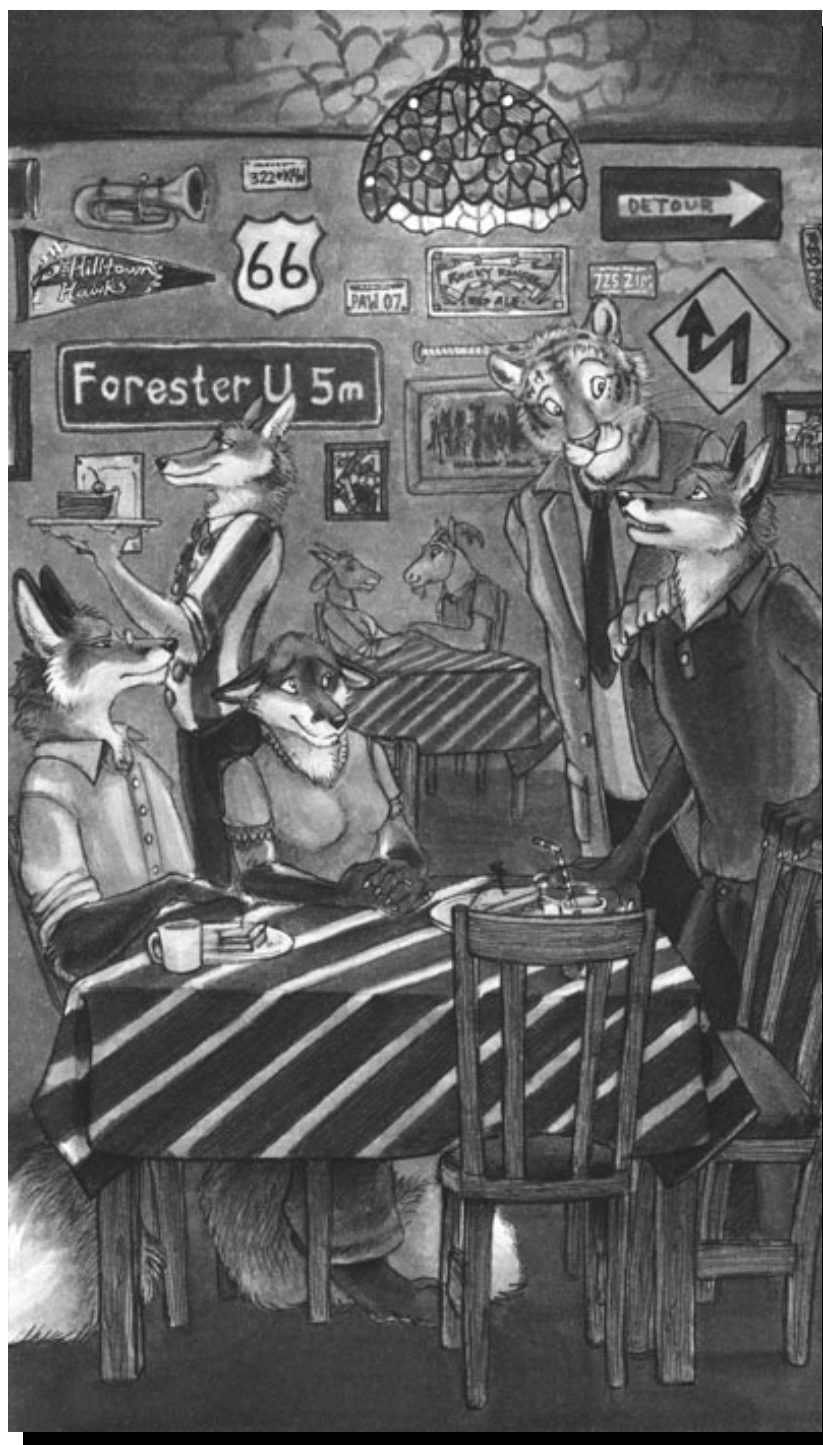
"I did," I say. "But I don't think it's going to happen."

"Why not? We're all here." He sits down at the empty place, his head coming up to around my chest, and smiles down at my parents. "Hi. I'm Devlin Miski. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Brenly Farrel," my father says. "My wife Eileen." My mother's jaw is hanging slightly open. "So you're Wiley's..."

"Boyfriend, yes," Dev says pleasantly, softly enough to be private. "Lee?"

Slowly, I sit, because as much as I want to leave, I don't want to leave him alone with them. Plus, he just called himself my boyfriend. I can't really walk out on him. As I pull my chair back up, the people around us go back to their own meals, though the skunks still look like they're listening.



"I'd hoped to have a little more warning before meeting you," my father says, with a pointed look at me.

"Hey, I didn't set this up," I say. "I figured I'd freak you out about graduation first, and save this one for tomorrow night. Dev just does things on his own sometimes. Without asking."

"I just happened to be at the bar," Dev says. "I like to grab a drink here sometimes."

My mother's ears are flicking forward and back. She keeps darting little glances at Dev. My father folds his paws together in front of his plate. "Well, now we've met you. If you don't mind, we were in the middle of something with our son."

"Actually," I say, "It was pretty much over, as I recall."

"It most certainly was not over," Father says. "Don't think you've gotten out of it by distracting us."

Dev looks back and forth. "Your son's really thought about his future a lot," he says.

"Apparently." My father focuses his ears on my tiger, looking up and leaning forward. "He says you've promised to provide for him so he can indulge this hobby of his without needing any money."

"Not exactly," Dev says, and now I stare at him too. He doesn't look at me, but I see the faintest twitch of his whiskers at the corner of his mouth. "I mean, I'm gonna support him, yeah, but it ain't a hobby. It's a job, and he's really good at it."

"You're going to support him," Father has pushed the plate of chicken strips aside, leaning both elbows on the table now. "And what do you do now that football season's over?"

"I'm going to play professionally," Dev says, promptly.

"That's your plan?"

"That's our plan," I cut in, edging closer to Dev. "I know a lot about what teams are looking for. I've helped him get prepared."

"Why don't you just plan to win the lottery?" Father says, not as acidly as I would have, but still.

"You don't win the lottery with talent," I say. "He's got the talent to play pro, and the smarts too."

"He goes to a D-II school."

"Oh, really? Is that where we are? I thought this was North State. It must be the colors that threw me off." See, acid like that.

Father glares. Dev says, "The point is, we're working on it together. Lee's helping me and I'm gonna help him. That's because we care about each other."

"And how long will that last?" Father says. "If you do get drafted, you'll just leave him behind. If you don't, you'll start fighting over money and..."

The glasses and plates on the table rattle as my mother stands, her chair scraping loudly back. "I don't feel good," she says. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Eileen," Father says, reaching out a paw.

"I'll be right back!" Her voice is shrill. When she turns, I can see the bristling of her tail fur.

She walks away fast. My father turns and glares at me. "You know how this upsets your mother. How you could be so inconsiderate as to do this without any warning whatsoever..."

"I didn't set this up." I raise my voice, very slightly.

"Why is your mother upset?" Dev asks me.

"She wants grandchildren," I say, without looking away from my father.

"You started this relationship," he says.

Dev flinches. "You told him about that?"

Father's nostrils widen, smelling the tension. "About what?"

Now they're both staring at me. I want to say that we should do this another time, but that feels to me, again, like quitting. The only problem is, I can't think of any other thing to do. "You know what? Let's just forget it. I'm fine, I'm okay with my life. You don't have to approve or even know about any of it. That make you happy?"

My father looks back at me. "Not really."

I shrug. "That's what you get. Come on, Dev. Let's go get something at Goose's."

He shakes his head and leans forward. "Mister Farrel, your son's told me a lot about you. He told me how you encouraged him to be a fireman, how you watched football with him, how you pushed for him to get a good education. I wanted to be a fireman when I was seven and my parents never got me a fire helmet."

I want to stop him. I feel my own tail starting to bristle. I know what he's trying to do and it just isn't going to work, not with Father, who right

now is giving me a sharp look, like a "how dare you share our memories with him" look. "Dev, it's okay," I say.

"No, no," Father says, leaning back. He folds his arms, tapping one finger. "Let him talk."

I kick Dev's foot, trying to get him to stop, but he ignores me. "I just think you're missing something pretty important here."

Father arches an eyebrow. He glances toward the restroom, but there's no sign of my mother. "Do tell."

Dev takes a breath. "He talks about you guys all the time." This is technically true, but I doubt they'd appreciate the words I use. "And it was really important to him that you meet me. He still wants you to be part of his life. And you want to be part of his. I mean, you haven't walked out yet." The 'you' being singular, obviously. "This ain't easy for me either. You can guess what most of my friends would think. But Lee's important to me, too. So can't we... can't we just work this out?"

I brace myself for my father's reply. The noises of the restaurant seem preternaturally loud. Dev's awkward sincerity seems so very small-town, so very Hilltown, that I start running through defenses in my mind. I imagine myself getting up and leaving with a lofty, "I won't let you talk to him that way." I imagine the various other things I could snap at him about not appreciating real emotions, being over-analytical, shut off and inaccessible—all the things I've been accused of myself by various people over the last few years. I've got all these remarks jostling for position in my head. And then a small miracle happens. "I hadn't really looked at it that way."

I scrutinize the words, the tone, for any hint of sarcasm. Failing to find any, I look at Father's expression. It's thoughtful, ears cupped forward, muzzle resting in one paw. He's looking at Dev with the concentration I've seen him use when we're watching football and one of the coaches does something unexpected. I hold my breath through the silence, afraid that anything I say will disrupt the miracle, afraid even to call attention to myself in case I remind my father that we're a family of foxes who live by mocking each other.

"So," Dev says, a smile starting to brush the corners of his mouth. "You think we can talk?"

Father glances toward the bathrooms again. "Not today." He looks at me, now, with that same concentration. "But soon, maybe. I'll work on

your mother."

"Really?" I can't keep the wonder out of my voice.

His expression changes to a more familiar combination of exasperation and resolve. He waves a finger between me and Dev, looking over the rim of his spectacles. "About this, yes. About you not graduating... that's another story. I'm very disappointed by the lying, the deception..."

"But you think you can get Mother to talk to Dev?"

"Eileen misses little paws running around the house," Father says. "That's why we have to watch those damn movies every time you're home."

"Wait a minute," I say. "You don't like them either?"

He snorts. "We watch them sometimes when you're not home, too. I've seen that barbecue ruined probably a hundred times since it happened. But," he holds my eyes with his, "I watch them again, because it's a small sacrifice and it makes your mother happy."

"Some sacrifices aren't so small," I say.

"Of course not," he says. "But, speaking of that..." He reaches down into a small bag and hands me a gift-wrapped DVD case. "This was going to be your graduation gift. Part of it, anyway. It's your favorite home movies, on DVD so you can watch them anytime you want. Or share them." His eyes flicker to Dev.

I turn the case over in my paws. "Thanks. I think."

"Thank you," Dev says with more enthusiasm. "Are there any in there that are really embarrassing to him?"

"Nothing but," I say.

He turns to me with a grin. "Good."

I manage a grin in return. "At least nobody's videotaped this dinner."

Father's looking off toward the restrooms again, where Mother's finally come out. She's walking slowly towards our table. Dev and I follow his gaze. "Maybe," Dev says, getting up, "I should wait outside."

I start to protest, then I feel the tension of the miracle still around me, the threat of destroying it. "I'll be out soon," I say.

Father says, "Thanks. It's a pleasure to meet you," and shakes Dev's paw. My tiger gives me a full-on warm smile, not the arousing kind, but the kind that makes me want to wrap my arms around him and kiss him, the kind that makes me thank whatever powers are watching out for me for going so far above and beyond the call of duty. I can't help but watch his

tail as he leaves, elegant in his suit. I watch him all the way out, until the door swings shut behind him.

"Well," Father says just before Mother gets back to the table, "he's not nearly as bad as I was expecting."

I feel in my smile an echo of the one Dev gave me. "No," I say. "He's not."

"Did your friend have to leave?" Mother sits down and smiles as though nothing had happened.

I nod. "He just wanted to say hi."

"Are you feeling better?" Father reaches over to touch her arm. I know he knows it was all just bullshit, but he's playing the game. Small sacrifices.

"Much." She smiles at him, then at me. "Did you boys talk about Wiley's plan for his future?"

Father nods. I hold up the DVD. "Thanks for this, too, Mother. I can't wait to open it up."

She smiles, picking up her sandwich and taking a big bite. Mayo drips onto the plate.

I don't feel like eating my roast beef. I tell them I have to get back to finish up some work by the morning, and give them kisses on the muzzle to say good night. We make arrangements to meet for lunch the next day, before they have to leave, and Father says, "Maybe your friend can come by again for a short time."

I balance the DVD in my paw as I walk through the restaurant. I will Watch it sometime, with Dev, but right now I want to think and focus about who I am, not who I used to be. Watching film is only useful when you can learn from it. The minute you start to live in it, to mistake it for the whole, that's when it starts to be dangerous. I'm as guilty as my parents on that score, all of us mired in our pictures of how we used to be. It took Dev to bring us into the present, his love and sincerity to cut the Gordian knot we'd tangled ourselves in.

Maybe not cut it, exactly, I think as I pass the road sign saying "Chevali 1,255 mi" and the rusted "One Way" sign. But at least loosen it.

I can see him waiting outside for me, paws in the pockets of his suit, watching traffic go by. Just looking at him, I get that feeling again inside. Every time I think I know about love, every time I think I've figured this tiger out, he shows me another layer, gives me another gift. The sign over

the entrance/exit to the restaurant is an old tobacco ad, for "Lucky Strikes."
How wonderful, I think, how appropriate. I tuck the DVD under one arm
and walk outside to join him.

Fourth And Long (Dev)

July, 2008

I wake up panting, paws clutching at the blankets. It's the first night of training camp, in the dorm at White Sands University. I always get weird dreams my first night in a new place. This one is familiar, though, the "I didn't get drafted because I'm gay" dream. It's come back in one form or another a dozen times in the last year and a half, from before the draft through my rookie year. I didn't have it so much in the offseason, but apparently coming back to camp set it off again.

So I do what I've learned to do, which is to sit up, breathe deeply, and remind myself of the night of the actual draft. Thanks to Lee, the Dragons did draft me, in the sixth round, and though Lee was with me, we both had our clothes on. For a while. Later that night, when the celebration became private, well, yeah.

As immensely cool as the draft was, as high as I felt that moment, with my dad clapping me on the back and all my friends joking about me buying them new cars and houses and the shine in Lee's blue eyes and the way he just looked at me without saying anything, his smile reaching the back of his cheekruffs... where was I? Oh, right. As cool as that was, it quickly became — ordinary, I guess is the best word.

At the rookie orientation, even though it was cool to have been actually drafted, there were still over two hundred guys there. And that was just this year. That many guys come into the league every year. True, as the deputy commissioner reminded us, not all of them stick with their new teams, but that wasn't exactly comforting. We attended seminars on talking to the media, listened to former players warn us about hanging with the right kind of friends, and got financial advice from a Meerkat Lynch bobcat in a stiff suit. And between panels and talks, I looked at the other rookies and wondered, how many of you are gay? Who else is hiding it?

The only guy I really knew there was Seito, the white wolf quarterback who beat us in the playoffs the previous year. We agreed that the two of us were going to make it, come hell or high water. He went to the Rocs, who were high on his arm and accuracy, and last I heard, he's still there. Lee says he's going to be their backup next year and he's doing pretty well for himself.

I wish I could say the same for myself. It's humbling to go from star starter to the third-string team. Lion Christ, the guys in the pros are *fast*. The coaches talked about moving me from corner to safety, so for a while I was practicing both positions and trying to learn two playbooks. I got to play in garbage time one game, fourth game of the season, when the Dragons were down 41-3 and had nothing to lose. I got burned for a touchdown by a coyote who caught me out of position. The next game, with the Dragons down 28-0, I got to go in with three minutes left in the game and got called for a pass interference penalty.

I guess it wasn't much of a surprise when two weeks after that, they threw me in as part of a trade to shore up their offensive line. So I'm now playing for the Chevali Firebirds, in the hot, dry desert. I don't mind the weather so much, and I don't mind leaving the Dragons, cause it was pretty clear I wasn't ever going to start there. The Firebirds were thin at corner, so I actually got in a couple games, near the end. But then over the summer they drafted this hot young fox at corner, and suddenly my position on the depth chart don't look so good.

Fortunately, one of the other tigers on the team is a vet who's actually got time to talk to me and help me out. You might know his name, or you might not: Fisher Kingston has two championship rings, from the Rocs' teams about ten years ago. He calmed me down and got me through the season, and even if the team did finish 4-12 and most of the coaching staff got cut, at least I still have a job this year. It's still not a starting job, but it's a job. For now.

What I mind most about the trade is that it took me away from Lee. When I was in Hilltown, we could see each other evenings, go out to dinner fairly often, and spend the night on a regular basis. Chevali is as hot as Hilltown is cold, as flat as Hilltown is, well, hilly, and as far south as Hilltown is north. It's a good four-hour plane ride, impossible for a weeknight, difficult even for a weekend. So our regular nights became three times a month, then twice a month by the end of the season. Chevali didn't make the playoffs, sure as the sun rises in the east (one helpful thing my father told me when I got traded was "at least you'll be home in January"), so for the last seven months or so I've been at my place in Hilltown and things got back to normal in a hurry.

Our last night together before I headed off to training camp was a little strained. I was nervous about camp, and he was feeling abandoned or

something. But we managed to figure out a way to get through our worries and make the night enjoyable. I'm sure it won't take much imagination to figure out how. I bought him plane tickets for the first weekend of camp, he promised to look up some good restaurants in Chevali for us to visit, and we parted with a kiss.

My bed right now is too small for Lee to share it, but that doesn't stop me from imagining him draped over me. On the other bed is my bud from last year, and roommate for training camp: Charm, the six-foot-tall mustang who kicks for the Firebirds. He and Snaps, both second-year players like me, call me "Gramps" because I stayed in school all four years. They're both 21 now, while I turned 23 in April. But the three of us spent hours playing Football'08 on Charm's Xbox last year, and we e-mailed over the summer. Occasionally. The only awkward thing is, well, like last night when we all arrived.

"Gramps!" Charm's hugs are borderline life-threatening, even though he only has half the strength in his arms that he does in his legs. "Ain't you retired yet?"

When I got my breath back, I punched him in the arm. "Yeah, who'd keep you whippersnappers in line if I did?"

He laughed and grabbed Snaps, lifting him in the air. I think I saw his eyes bug out when Charm put him down.

"So," Charm said, looking from one to the other of us, "I know what I been dyin' to do for four months."

Snap waved a paw in front of his nose. "Shower?"

When Charm looks down his nose at you, it's a lot more nose than most people can put into it. "Gramps, you bring that girlfriend of yours along?"

Just like that, the warm familiar welcoming feeling got that warm familiar sour taste. I shook my head and hope they didn't notice the automatic curl of my tail. "She's got, ah, work. Couldn't get away. Besides, once we start practice we won't have any time."

"How about you, Snaps? Ball and chain?"

The wolverine shook his head, pantomiming wings. "Free as a boid."

"Great! Three for the Pink Poodle." He put an arm around both of our shoulders and squeezed. "Great to see you guys again. We're goin' to the cham-peen-ship this year, I know it. If Hellentown can make the playoffs, anyone can. All the talent we got, that new coach..."

"Samuelson?" I grasped at any straw to get off the subject of girlfriends and strip clubs. "Two-and-six-in-the-playoffs Samuelson?"

"At least he got there," Charm said. "He's a player's coach, 'swhat I hear."

"*You'll be* in the champ game," Snaps said. His whole posture slumped at the mention of the team. "You see that new kid they got at halfback? And you, Gramps, they picked up a hotshot corner, where's that leave you?"

"At least we can drive around together looking for jobs after we get cut." I tried to joke, though Snaps's comment knifed to the central worry of every player, young or old. Except Charm.

"Don't be fuckin' nervous nellies, you two. You got experience and brains on your side. Gramps has whole years of experience on that kid, what's his name?"

"Colin Smith," I said. "He ran a 4.2 at the combine. Sixteen tackles and five interceptions last year."

Charm blew a snort, but his eyes widened a bit. "Someone been doing his homework. You worried, Gramps?"

"Nah," I said. "I scored ten points higher than him on the WannaLick."

The "WannaLick" is our nickname for the intelligence test they administer at the combine, largely considered to be a huge waste of time by everyone. Out of a hundred, I actually scored pretty high, in the seventies. Charm scored thirty-two, which is where the nickname comes from, as in, "Thirty-two? I got my starting job. Wanna lick my balls?"

He's not sophisticated, but he's fun. He hooted and slapped me on the back. "That's the spirit. Now, who's drivin'? Snaps, you got your truck? Mine's low on gas."

So I went to the strip club with them, and tucked a few dollars into the waistbands of some strippers, and came back to the room two minutes before curfew. The only thing I didn't do with them is get horny and go jerk off in the bathroom. Not that they told me that's what they were doing, but in a dorm of seventy guys, you figure these things out. There's a reason the rooms all smell like disinfectant every morning when we go to shower, and it ain't because the school keeps 'em clean.

It's times like this, waking up from my paranoid dream in the middle of the night, that make me look over at Charm's muscular outline under the covers and wish I could have as uncomplicated a life. He barely even

worries about making the team. Not that he needs to—there's only two or three other kickers in the league who can boot it as far as he can. With that range, he doesn't even need to be accurate. But like I said, I don't hang out with him much on the playing field.

I can't get back to sleep after the dream. I sit there and think about Lee, fifteen hundred miles away. I wish there were a club I could go to that would offer me the same pick-me-up that Charm gets. It's not a gay-straight thing; it's a single-not single thing. Though I get the feeling that even if Charm had a girlfriend, he'd still have fun going out to clubs. I used to, but now it just makes me feel awkward and out of place, and I get enough of that in the locker room.

Going to training camp almost makes me forget that. I haven't been on a field with a whole team in months. The offense and defense wear different colors, offense in our home reds with gold numbers, defense in gold with red numbers. A small pack of wolves, the quarterbacks, stand apart from everyone else, and Aston, the starter, lounges on the bench nearby, watching them like an alpha watches his pups. The two hulking groups are the two lines, a couple elephants in with the bears and horses in the red jerseys; beefy tigers, another bear, and a couple bulked-up wolves in gold. Near the quarterbacks are the wolverines and smaller horses in red, running backs under the eye of Jaws, the wolverine sitting next to Aston on the bench. And around the periphery of the red group, always in motion, the wide receivers: a cluster of foxes, a couple cheetahs pushing and joshing, and three deer. The lighter-built gold players are stretching and joking: cougars and coyotes, more foxes — including the new kid, Colin, who can't seem to stand still, his tail waving like a flag as he jumps back and forth — and me.

And all this red and gold is against the backdrop of the green grass, the blue sky, and the bright red seats of the stands. Last time I was in camp it was in Hilltown, where the temperature was about the same, but it was three or four times as humid, and everyone's fur was all puffed out. Here, it's dry as a bone, but I don't mind the scratchiness in my fur. I've got my gold uniform on, number 57, and I'm part of the Chevali Firebirds. I take a moment to stop and soak it all in.

The other cornerbacks and safeties greet me, guys I never got to know all that well in half a season, guys who are more assured of staying with the team, especially with this new rookie coming in ready to light it up. We

talk about our summers, about the coyote who got released and is now practicing with Freestone, about the fox who retired, about the new kid again, about who he's gonna push off the roster. Nobody comes out and says it's gonna be me, but two of the guys mention that they heard that Highbourne is short on corners and they look at me when they say it. We're all pretty good at dividing our teammates into the ones who are worried, the thirty hopefuls who won't make the cut, and the ones who aren't, the ones like Jaws, Aston, Charm, and Colin. Stars, established role players, and high-priced rookies. What I can't do is situate myself on one side or the other of the divide. So eventually, I go talk to Fisher.

More accurately, Fisher comes looking for me. Even though we spend a lot of time with different units, he notices something's bothering me. Unfortunately, he finally approaches me on Saturday, when Lee's come down to visit and is watching us practice.

I got a bit of a shock the first time I saw him: For the first time in a year or so, instead of the casual oxford shirt and slacks he was wearing last night, he's in drag, with a cornflower-blue dress and something else blue behind his ear, I can't quite see what. Either that or he's skipped practice and some random vixen has shown up to watch us play, but that seems unlikely.

And then I got a second shock: someone else making his way over to Lee. He turned to see the spotted skunk, in t-shirt and shorts, and his ears went back and his posture stiffened. I wanted to watch what happened, but I got called back onto the field for the next set of sprints. By the time I remember to look up a little while later, Lee's sitting by himself again.

At the break, I go over to the stands to talk to him. That's when Fisher decides to jog over to join me. I can't really tell him to go away, so I stop short of the stands to intercept him. To my surprise, he keeps going. "Come on," he says.

That's when I notice the tigress leaning on the railing a little ways down from Lee. She's his height, pretty, but older. She looks more like a mom than a groupie, dressed in a plain shirt and jeans, and then I realize where Fisher's going. I follow him, but now I try to wave Lee away. He, of course, ignores me.

"Dev, this is Gena," Fisher says as we get closer. He smiles and rubs his nose to hers, their ears perking forward to each other.

"Even prettier than he said," I say, extending a paw. She has a soft,

firm grip and a smile that goes all the way up to her ears.

"Thank you," she says, "and thank you for the anniversary flowers last month."

I shoot Fisher a look. He's got his ears back and is studying the helmet he's holding in his paws intently. "I, uh..."

She laughs. "I know, Fisher was supposed to take credit for them, but he didn't know what color they were."

"Fish," I say. "I e-mailed you the picture."

He scuffs the ground and doesn't say anything. Gena rubs his shoulder. "It's okay," she says. "It was a sweet thing to do anyway."

The comment makes me strangely uncomfortable, as if she can see that I'm gay. Football players aren't supposed to be sweet. I say, "I set a reminder on my calendar after you mentioned it, that's all. No big deal."

"You see?" she says to Fisher. "One phone conversation and he remembers the day and everything. You were there..."

"Yeah, yeah," he growls, and looks over my shoulder. "Who's this?"

"Lee," my fox says, puttin' on the femme, one paw daintily outstretched. I half-turn to include him in the circle. Gena eyes him while Fisher steps forward.

"So you're the one's been keepin' Dev honest." Fisher chuckles. "Oh," Lee says with a coy glance at me, "I'm only one fox."

"Actually," I say to Fisher, "would you excuse us for a moment?"

"Now, Dev, let's not be rude," Lee says. "It's a pleasure to meet your teammate and his charming wife."

Gena looks faintly disapproving. I guess the mixed-species thing doesn't really work for her. I hope that's it, anyway. "How long have you two been together?"

We exchange looks. "Two and a half years," I say, getting some satisfaction from Lee's confirming nod.

This thaws Gena a little bit. "College sweethearts?"

"Absolutely," Lee says.

Fisher's whiskers twitch, brushing Gena's. "See?" he says. "Not all guys turn into complete skirrhounds when they get to the pros."

"You did," she says, and licks his nose affectionately.

"Well," he says, "I didn't have a college sweetheart as sweet as you. Or Miss...?"

"Farrel," Lee says, making me wince at him using his real name.

"Well, aren't you a gentleman."

"Yes," Gena says, giving Fisher a warning look. "Isn't he."

I mock-growl. "You keep yer smooth talk over on that side of the fence. Maybe we should go back out on the field, huh?"

"Hey, hey," he says, looking from me to Gena and taking a step back.

Lee puts a paw on my arm. "Now, Dev," he says, "You did say Mister Kingston has been terribly helpful."

"My mother used to say, some people will help you right into an early grave."

Fisher looks injured. "Now, ain't I kept you around through the off-season?"

"I dunno what you had to do with it," I say. "Less you got some photos of the owner he wouldn't want in the papers."

"Thanks for that image," Fisher says. "Actually, believe it or not, I been thinkin' a lot about your problem."

"Oh," Lee says, "you told him? I thought that was just between us."

I could strangle him. Gena politely looks away. Fisher's too much of a jock not to laugh at me for it. "His other problem," he says. "Colin Smith."

"Yes, he is a problem," Lee says. "What's your solution?" The way he says it makes it sound like he's got a solution already, but if he has, we haven't discussed it.

Fisher looks at Lee with some interest now. "We're thin at the Will," he says. "I think Devlin could fit in there."

"Hm." Lee considers this, looking me up and down. "You know, you may just have something there, Mister Kingston."

"What's the Will?" Gena asks.

"Weak-side linebacker," I say.

"Weak side is my side," Fisher tells her. "The side opposite the tight end."

"It'd be some blitzing and run-stuffing, but mostly short coverage," Lee says. "Dev's great at coverage. He just can't get down the field with the league's top receivers. He'll never start at corner, even here."

"Hey," I say, couching it as a protest at his words, but trying to make it a warning, too. He's starting to lose the femme a bit.

Fisher gives him a curious glance. "That's right," he says slowly. "He could play safety, but we're stocked there. He might not start at linebacker, but he could be a good number two. We've got Corey Mitchell and not

much after that."

"The head case?" Lee asks.

Gena smiles. "I guess they talk work a lot more than we do." She turns to Lee. "When he gets home, the last thing I want to hear about is more football."

"That's too bad," my fox replies. "I just can't get enough."

"Hey," I say. "Isn't that Steez over there? Why don't we go talk to him right now?"

"Steez?" Gena looks at Fisher.

"Linebackers coach. Yeah, sure." He gives Lee another look before we walk off. I want to see Lee walk away, but he stays to talk to Gena. I force myself to look back to the field, to where Steez is talking to, what a coincidence, Corey Mitchell.

Fisher tells me a couple things about how to get in good with Steez as we move to intercept them. The key, he says, is to win over Gerrard Marvel, the coyote who plays middle linebacker and has been almost Steez's assistant coach since the end of last year. But first, of course, I have to get Steez and Coach to let me switch positions. He hangs back and gives me a thumbs-up as we get within hearing range.

Steez is a cougar, kind of short, but hard to catch up to because he's always moving. Right now he looks like Corey is holding him back. His tail twitches and he keeps pacing from side to side.

"Let me ask something, Corey. We are not having worked together before, so I must know this to be able to coach you." Corey nods, apparently oblivious to the glare in Steez's eyes and the tone of his voice. The shorter cougar jabs a finger at the playbook Corey's holding. "Did you read this? Or are you just sticking it under your pillow each night and hoping the tooth fairy magically give you understanding?"

"I read it," Corey says. "Don't flip out. It just takes a while."

"I see." Steez folds his arms. "Tell me, how long is 'a while'? Is it one week? One month? Perhaps on the last game of the year, when we are once again missing the playoffs, you will finally understand our plays?"

"Call me 'Killer'," Corey says.

Steez looks as though Corey'd just dropped his pants and mooned him. "What? What? What?" is all he manages.

"Killer's my nick," Corey says. "I gotta be called that or I can't be it."

The shorter cougar's eyes narrow again. His accent overwhelms his

next words so that I almost can't understand them. "I call you Killer when you kill something! Get out, go! Waste no more time here when you could be ignoring playbook!"

Corey gives him a bewildered look. As he stalks past me, he shakes his head and gives me one of those comradely what-the-fuck-is-his-problem shrugs. I ignore him. Steez is already walking back to the bench shaking his head, looking down at his clipboard.

I look back at Fisher, urging me on, then past him at the stands. Lee and Gena are still standing together, watching me. I take a breath, steady myself, and run after the coach.

"Coach Mikilios," I call, waving a paw.

He stops, turns, sizes me up. "Miski," he says. "Cornerback, out of position. What?"

"Out of position?"

"Yes, yes. Not a good fit at corner. What?"

His "what?" is becoming increasingly sharp. "You're right, I'm out of position. Fisher thought I'd be good at weakside linebacker."

He nods as though he'd already thought of the idea. "Possible, yes. Can you study a playbook?"

"Yes, sir."

He leans closer to me. "Do you want to play this position?"

"Yes, sir," I say. "Anything I have to do to make the team."

He studies me. "Do you have stupid nickname?"

I shake my head. "The other rookies call me "Gramps", that's all."

"Hah." This amuses him. "Tell me about weakside linebacker. Come, walk."

We walk for a while. He's looking at his clipboard, so I can't tell whether he's actually paying attention to me or not. But when I stop, he says, "Yes? Yes?" So I guess he is. I tell him everything I can scrounge up from my studies and conversations with Lee about football. I talk about my experience in coverage and why I think it would be a good fit for me. I talk about having studied offensive formations so I can recognize what the other team is doing, and at that he looks up from the clipboard. "You study offense?"

I nod. "Sure." He looks so intent that I say, "Doesn't everyone?" I know that everyone doesn't, of course. That remark is the kind of thing I've learned from Lee.

"Not everyone." He rubs his whiskers thoughtfully. We've arrived at the bench, where Gerrard Marvel is sucking down some water. The coyote looks up as Steez taps me on the arm. "I talk to coach. Decide tomorrow or next day. At least maybe some competition get 'Killer' to read playbook, hah?"

Gerrard is looking at me curiously. I grin at both of them. "He'll have plenty of time to read the playbook on the bench."

"Hah." He grins, turns away, and starts talking to Gerrard. I leave them and jog back to Fisher. Beyond him, Lee and Gena are waiting, but our break's almost up, so thankfully we don't have time to give them much more than a quick overview of the hopeful news before saying good-bye. The tigers kiss, and Lee wants to kiss me, but I dodge that. Gena invites him out for a drink, but with a glance at me, he declines, saying he's busy.

It's only when I'm watching him leave that I notice the spotted skunk, high up in the stands, following him out.

I bring it up with Lee that night over dinner at a nice steak house, after the waiter has taken our plates away and we're trying to digest the meal. I'm trying not to fall asleep after the huge steak and the exhausting day. "That was Brian in the stands today, wasn't it?"

He takes a drink, finishing off his wine. Chardonnay. I think I've finally learned that. "Yeah."

"What'd he want?"

Lee puts the glass down. He shrugs. "Just to say hi."

"What'd you talk about?"

Now he looks at me. "He just wanted to say hi."

"How did he know you'd be there?"

"Well," he says, "I expect he read it in the Society column."

I can feel us teetering on the edge of an argument. It's not worth it to make that extra push. After all, it's not like Lee's not allowed to stay friends with him. And I'm too worn out physically right now to be ready for one anyway. "Speaking of Society," I say, "why the new outfit?"

That gets me a smile. "I just wanted to look nice for the new football season. Did I pass?"

"Yeah," I say. "Does this mean you're going to be doing that a lot?"

"I don't know." He rubs a finger around his water glass, collecting the condensation on it and then licking it clean slowly. "Did you like it?"

I never know what to say to that. If I say yes, then it's like I only like him when he dresses as a vixen. If I say no, then I'm rejecting him, somehow. So I sidestep it, watching him lick his fingerpad, and say, "You fooled Fisher and Gena. At least for a bit."

He grins. "You tigers are all easy to fool."

"Just don't pull anything like in my dorm that time."

He lowers ears and eyebrows, challenging me with his stare. "Oh?"

"It's just... it's different here. This is serious." That stare worries me, because I know it means he feels I'm holding him back. "It's not you, it's the guys and the team and all. This is, y'know, professional."

"Really? In a professional football league?"

I flatten my ears. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Then how did you mean it?" He puts his elbows on the table and rests his muzzle on his paws. I can feel us coming closer to that edge again. It's part of the excitement and tension of being with him.

This time, though, I feel like I need to go further. I search for the right words. "The guys here are... they're more hardcore. In college, you know, we were all just goofin' around, it wasn't serious. Here, it's... it's real life." I can feel how real it is, in my aching muscles and joints.

"You think I'm just playing around?"

"Well, what are you doing?"

I should've known better than to hope that would slow him down. "If you don't know, then I don't know what to tell you."

"You want me to just," I lower my voice, "introduce you 'round the locker room as my boyfriend?"

"No," he says.

"Cause maybe we can wait until I make the team before I try to get kicked off it."

"You don't know you'll be kicked off." He looks around the steak house at the linen tablecloths, the couples talking low over candles, all male-female. The only all-male groups are the boisterous hyenas in the corner booth and the aged deer at the long table celebrating some kind of business dinner. "Someone's got to do it. Someone's going to do it. Eventually."

"If someone's gonna do it, it'll have to be someone like Jaws, a star who's so tough that people won't dare make fun of him and teams will sign him no matter what. He could get arrested for anything short of murder and

he'd have a five-year contract waiting when he got out."

"Is he?"

"What? Arrested? No, he's a boy scout. Except for, y'know, if you get in his way on a run..."

Lee shakes his head. "I mean, is he gay?"

"How the hell should I know? He could be." I lower my voice again, looking at the raccoon couple next to us. They're four feet away, within earshot, but they seem to be absorbed in each other. "I could be the only one."

"You're not." He takes a drink of water. "Odds are there are at least three or four on every team."

"Okay, but we don't exactly have a pre-game prayer circle, or flame-off, or anything. What about you? Does Morty know about me?"

He jerks as if he'd gotten a static electricity shock. "Of course not. I wouldn't put your career in danger like that."

"What if I wasn't a football player? What if I was just a guy?"

"Sure," he says, but then his ears droop and his shoulders sag. "Maybe."

"Does he even know you're..."

We sit there in silence, eyes locked, him waiting for me to finish the sentence, me knowing I don't have to. Finally he shakes his head, slowly. "No."

"Yeah," I say. "Face it, we're just in careers where we have to sneak around. In ten or fifteen years, when I retire..."

"It'll change before then," he says. "It just won't be us doing the changing."

"I'm okay with that," I say. "I'd rather sneak around and be safe. Have a chance of making it those ten or fifteen years."

He doesn't respond. The waiter returns just then to ask if we want dessert. I'm still hungry, but he's not, and I can wait. So we hold off on dessert and just take a short walk through the hot summer night. We deliberately stay away from the subject of our relationship and talk instead about his work with the Dragons. It's his second full year with them, his first scouting college games on his own. They have him full time on the college circuit, watching film from game after college game. I thought he'd be going to the Dragons games when the season started, or to the upcoming opponent games, but there's apparently a whole other branch of the

scouting department that handles those duties. He's a draft scout, which means he just evaluates talent for the club to draft. So Saturday night, he should be technically watching games live, but there'll be plenty of time to watch the film later.

As a small concession to his job, we turn on the Game of the Week in the hotel room. At least, the TV is in front of us and our faces are both turned toward it, him on his stomach and me on his back, but for the life of me I couldn't tell you what the score was or even what teams are playing. Lee probably could, but he's always been better at multi-tasking than I am. I do remember thinking it would've been funny if someone scored a touchdown at just the right moment, but the scoring in the game doesn't happen until later, when I'm resting with my whiskers brushing his ears and the world is taking its time, spinning lazily around us.

Steez grabs me the next day and pulls me into Coach's office, the first time I've been up close and personal with Coach Samuelson. The whole office smells like wolf; he's really put his mark on it. I can't even smell Coach Kimble's scent any more, and he was a wolf too. Samuelson is a standard grey coloring, darker down the muzzle, but what I see most is the intensity of his gaze. He tells me that usually this goes the other way, that they're the ones who suggest players change positions, but they think it's a good idea for me. He's holding up a different playbook than the one I've got. It's got the same red and gold logo on it, but it says "Linebackers."

Steez, standing behind him with his arms folded, just nods as Coach asks how serious I am about this new position. I give the wolf the same speech. He fixes me with those yellow eyes before holding out the playbook. "It's yours if you want it."

I weigh the Cornerbacks' playbook in my paw. I know it backwards and forwards. Can I learn another whole book? I don't really have a choice, I remember. It's move forward or get out of the way. I drop my book on his desk and grab the Linebackers' book. My claws snag the plastic cover.

"Careful with that," Coach says.

Steez gives me a feline smile. "You are now mine. Linebacker practice nothing like cornerbacks. Linebackers meeting tomorrow." He points at me, and I see his ropy tail lashing again. "Do not be late. Rest of today, regular workouts. Go!"

I go, stash the new book carefully in my locker, and attack the calisthenics with renewed energy and purpose. For the first time this year, I

feel myself maybe stepping across that divide, into confidence and security.

Ogleby calls me the next morning. "What's this I hear about you changing positions?" he demands. It's funny to hear him demand in his high-pitched ferret voice.

"Who called you?"

"It's in the paper! Something about you in the paper and I didn't put it there. What the hell?"

"It seems like a good fit," I said. "Coach is cool with it."

"Jesus Lion Christ on a goddamn stick, 'Coach is cool with it? Is Coach in charge of your career? You know the work I go through trying to figure out the goddamn market for you? Get the best deal I can, and you go changing positions on me?"

"Calm down," I say. Ogleby's a half-decent agent, as Lee says, by which he means he's about half a decent agent. But he is the only one I've got.

"Don't you tell me to calm down. I tell you to calm down! That's my job!"

"Okay, but I gotta get to practice in a couple minutes," I say.

"Are you in at this position? Definitely in? You're going to make the cut?"

"I don't know. I'm practicing with the linebackers..."

"Are you the best? Going to start this year maybe?" He's gone from furious to overly excited in about thirty seconds.

"I don't *know*. Listen, I need to go to practice or I won't start."

"Call me after they tell you. Call me right away, you hear?"

I hang up the phone and shake my head. If I get a starting job — I don't even let myself imagine that — I'll be only the second one of Ogleby's clients to be starting, and the other one is on special teams. So I get his excitement, but it's still annoying.

I put Ogleby out of my mind after that, because I have to absorb everything. The linebackers practice alone first, then have regular drills with the team, then go back to practicing alone in the afternoon. The morning practice isn't any worse than with the corners, which is to say it's still hell. The afternoon linebackers meeting, though, is where I first get the idea of what I'm getting into.

"Position of linebacker is most important one on the defense," Steez

says in a booming voice. "Is difference between success and failure. Teams know d-line will rush the quarterback and stop the running lanes. They know safeties and corners cover wideouts. They plan for that. What they don't plan for is what you're going to be doing. Sometimes you'll drop back, sometimes you'll rush forward. It all depends on your ability to," he starts ticking off on his fingers, "learn the opposition, read the defense, react to the play. Learn, read, react. Learn, read, react."

The cornerbacks coach with the Dragons only used the word "learn" about the playbook, so that we wouldn't end up in the middle of the field while the receiver we were supposed to cover was heading all alone to the end zone. I look around during the talk. The other new guys to the linebacking corps have that "yeah, yeah," bravado grin on, except for the coyote with a ragged ear, who looks to be my age. He's focused on Steez, his eyebrows arched together. Killer just looks bored. Gerrard, sitting to one side of the coach, stops in his survey of the crowd when he sees me looking at him and returns my stare. I look away.

"What is the number one skill of a top linebacker?" Steez looks around at us.

The coyote with the ragged ear raises a paw and says, "Tackling."

Steez shakes his head. "No."

Killer shoots the coyote a scornful look. "Speed," he says without raising his paw.

"No." Steez folds his arms and half-turns toward Gerrard.

"Decision making," the coyote says, not bothering to disguise the distaste on his muzzle as he looks at Killer.

Oh, great. Decision making. Don't you actually have to know something before you can make decisions about it?

"Don't worry so much about that," Fisher tells me that evening. His tail waves lazily behind him as he tosses a football from one paw to the other. We're sitting in my room in the last of the daylight, me on the bed with my new playbook, him walking off the day's workout. He says at his age he needs to cool down as much as he needs to warm up. I don't see how he still has the energy to walk around after the day of practice we just went through. "You're a good study. You'll pick it up."

"In two weeks?" I don't even look at him, just keep reading the playbook.

He laughs and claps me on the shoulder. "You'll make it past the first cuts. You're smarter than I was when Victorino was trying to get me to learn the D-line playbook."

"So I have three weeks." The circles and crosses all blur in my eyes. I try to re-focus on the page.

"Listen," he says, "talk to Gerrard. He'll help you out."

"Why would he do that?" I ask, wishing he'd just let me study.

Charm has this way of bashing the door so it swings open and slams the wall when he comes in. He almost whacks Fisher's football when he does it this time. "Hey, Gramps!" he booms. "Quick game of 360?"

Kickers have about one percent of the practice the rest of us go through. We hate them. "Can't." I gesture to the playbook. "Go look up Snaps."

"Ah, he's studyin' too." Charm fumbles the football when Fisher tosses it to him, bends down to pick it up off the floor. "Everyone's so stressed around here. Guys need to relax or else they won't perform."

I look up in time to see his smirk. "Speak for yourself," I say.

"You should work on your catching." Fisher's looking at Charm. "Might actually have to play football one day."

Charm smirks, then wings the ball hard across the room. Fisher snaps it out of the air with one paw and grins. "I don't have claws," Charm says.

"All the more reason." Fisher tosses the ball lazily in one paw. His claws aren't extended, I see. "You got to devote yourself to the game. Can't do it half-assed. Hey. How many kickers does it take to score a touchdown?"

"Let's see you kick a field goal, Gramps." The horse has his arms folded, staring at Fisher.

"I thought that was my nickname," I say.

"Might as well be," Charm says. "Can't tell the two of you apart no more anyway." He stamps the floor, shoots me a look, and stomps out.

"Don't let 'im distract you," Fisher says. "One on every team. Thinks talent'll carry him anywhere he needs to go. You want to stick around in this league, you gotta apply yourself, study, learn. Not enough to just show up and do your job. You need to be prepared to do anyone's job. You need to know the game inside and out. If it was just about talent, I'd be playing golf on brown grass about now."

"Do I have to learn golf?" I half-joke, still studying the plays.

He shrugs. "Not a bad idea. Just don't get so good that you're better than the stars."

My phone rings. My first thought is it's Lee, so I grab it and have it half-open before I see that the area code is east coast. By that time, it's too late to ignore it.

Ogleby starts talking before I can even say anything. "How's it going?" he squeaks. "You going to make the cut? Listen, I got some interest from a couple teams who say they could use a backup corner. You could be a third string somewhere easy. Maybe second. You want me to go talk to them?"

I gesture to Fisher, who's backing out of the room, to stay. "No, I'm gonna be good here," I tell him. "Thanks."

"You sure? Hey, listen, the press isn't picking up my press releases on you. Can you get out more?"

"I need to study to make the cut," I say. "What are you writing about?"

"Just stuff," he says. "Don't worry about it. You want to meet some celebrities? You could pal around with them, date a starlet or something. I got a friend who knows the guy who represents Carroll Chavon. You know who she is, right?"

It doesn't really matter what I say, so I just say, "Sure." My finger traces the linebacker's responsibilities for 45 Banana Split in the playbook diagram.

Fisher's apparently cooled down enough that he can do some stretches. He braces himself against the doorframe.

"She played the sister for two episodes on 'Panther House,' Sony has her signed to play a supporting role in 'Bad Medicine 3,' she's on the way up, just like you. What do you say?"

I turn the page. All the plays in this book are named after desserts, and it's making me hungry. I don't know what Lee would think of me fake-dating a starlet. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"No thanks? Are you kidding me? She's going to be in 'Bad Medicine 3'! Do you know what 'Bad Medicine 2' made?" It wouldn't matter if I'd wanted to answer. "Two hundred million!"

This play is 48 Hot Fudge. The numbers are some sort of key to the principal players, but I haven't figured out what yet. "That's great," I say.

"So you'll meet her? Look, if you don't get together with some starlet, then could you get arrested? Anything to get your name in the paper?"

The hard thing about these formations is that while they show me where I start, they're not good at telling me where I need to go. That all depends on what the other side is doing. "Don't you have any other starlets?" This makes Fisher look up from his stretching at me.

"None as hot as this one. I'd do her myself if I were a foot taller." He giggles. "Okay, I'll set it up for Tuesday night. You're free Tuesday, right?"

"No."

"Good. Love ya, kid, get back to studying. Knock 'em dead."

This is a lot more complicated than cornerback or safety, which involved lining up in one of two or three positions and either dropping back to wait for action or shadowing a particular player. I say, absently, "Bye" to the dead phone line.

"Agent?" Fisher says.

I watch him stretch his paws, and listen to the joints pop. It sounds painful. "You're gonna make the team, aren't you?"

"Hell, yeah," he says, "I'm a survivor." "Am I?"

He comes over and sits next to me. "Best case for you at corner is you get called back to sit on the bench if someone goes down. At linebacker, you're a solid shot to make the team as a backup. We got nobody else at the Will"

"You know any of these plays?" I point to the book in my lap. He turns a couple of the pages. "Some. Let's go through 'em." I stare at my knees after he takes the playbook. "You think I can beat out Killer?"

He leafs through the book, reading quickly. "You can beat out anyone who don't have his whole mind in the game."

I want to ask, what about someone who does, but my cell rings just then. This time it is Lee.

"I'm so tired of film," he says. "When do I fly down this weekend?"

"Yeah," I say. "Um, y'know... they announce cuts on Monday and I really need to study."

"Oh," he says. "Fine."

"Don't be like that," I say. "I need the time and you know I do." Fisher's watching me. When he sees me looking at him, he gets up and starts to leave again. I wave for him to stay.

"So do I," Lee says.

"What do you want me to do?" I say.

"Just forget it," he says. "Call me when you're going to have time

again. I guess I'll go hang out with Brian this weekend."

"Wait, what?" He's already hung up. I stare at the phone until I realize I'm squeezing it so hard it's in danger of breaking. I stuff it back into my pocket and look at Fisher, who's staring at me. I shrug as nonchalantly as I can. "Girls."

He sits back down, staring at the playbook. "You tell the agent about having a girl?"

It's an odd question. "He wouldn't care. Why?"

"Sounded like he was trying to set you up. Mine used to do that before I got married."

"How do you manage with the family?"

It's a couple seconds before he answers. "Oh, Gena takes care of the kids during the season. I get home when I can."

"You miss 'em?"

"Course." He traces a claw along the play. "Caramel Sundae 91. What's your responsibility?"

"Does Gena ever get upset that you're gone so much during the season?"

"She wanted someone who's around all the time, she shouldn'ta started dating a football player." He pauses, still looking down at his book. "You know? Now, you're in a nickel formation on this play. What's your responsibility here?"

I chalk his abruptness up to concern over getting me past the first round of cuts. It's hard to shift my mind back to thinking about football, but I force it. Pretty soon I'm submerged in it, plays and formations and names swirling around in my head.

Last year, I didn't know enough to be scared of the first cut. This year, I'm kind of a wreck. It doesn't help when my dad calls, telling me he's holding an accounting job for me at the auto shop "just in case." I tell him about the new position and he says it's great that I'm not just giving up, and that the office in the auto shop has a window.

There's enough uncertainty about my new position that I'm not fully reassured until I see Steez and he tells me to be at practice half an hour early tomorrow. Nobody I know, in fact, is gone the next day, which I take as a good sign. I get voicemail when I call Lee to tell him the news, but he calls back half an hour later and congratulates me. It's the first time we've talked since that evening I was studying with Fisher. I don't ask him what

he meant about hanging out with Brian, and he doesn't mention Brian again. He does say he should be able to make it down for my first pre-season game against Pelagia. I log in and buy him the tickets while we talk, and hang up feeling pretty good about where things stand, which is good because it leaves my mind clear to prep for the game.

Pre-season games are weird things. It's almost like a practice with another team, but you're keeping score, and oh by the way if you don't perform well, you could be off the team in another week. Like a midterm in your college classes. It's not the final, it's not a real job, but it sure as hell is a test. And like a test, you pretty much know how well you do.

Technically, as the new guy, I should be with the third team, but after a couple series watching the second team play, Steez says to Coach Samuelson, "Let's put Miski in."

Coach chews on a rawhide stick, like a lot of the wolves who play football. When he takes the stick out of his muzzle and measures me with clear yellow eyes, I feel a bit of what opposing players must have felt, lining up across from him in his playing days.

"Do it," he says, and goes back to his clipboard.

Steez waves a paw at me. "Get your helmet on, Miski," he says. "Go out there next series and call Kintar in."

I get set and look up into the stands, toward where Lee's seats are. He's up there all right—in the blue blouse, wearing a large white hat with a wide brim. For a moment, I'm back at Forester, jogging out onto the field with my "vixen" watching and cheering me on. I almost jog to the cornerback position because of that, which would be a big mistake. I make sure that's the last mistake I come close to making.

I keep an eye on Lee now and then, and feel his encouragement. The plays all look routine, but only on one do I see any action, a run to my side where the opposing RB gets through our line. I tackle him at the knees and bring him down. It'd be nice to have a game-saving tackle or interception, but I'll settle for not making any big mistakes. The position still feels weird to me; I should be further down the field, I should be shadowing the wideouts. But I'm keeping the practices in my head, all the plays and studying I've done, and I don't screw up. When I run past Gerrard, coming off the field as Steez calls for the third-team defense, the coyote flashes me a grin and a nod.

I look for Lee, to give him a thumbs-up. He's watching me, waves as I

gesture to him, and then turns—not that I can tell at this distance, but he looks annoyed—to the person next to him. They have a brief, animated discussion, which is all I see before I have to pay attention to my teammates again. But I saw enough to hazard a guess that the person next to him is a spotted skunk.

After that, I can't help looking up at the stands again several times. Lee's watching the game, and me, and not talking to Brian, if that is who's sitting next to him. By the time the final whistle sounds, I'm feeling better, if not great, about Brian's presence.

We win the game, so the post-game speech from Coach is an upbeat one. It's interesting to hear Coach Samuelson's take on victory speeches as opposed to Coach Gallick (Hilltown), who was a real rah-rah kind of guy, or Coach Kimble (Chevali, last year), who wouldn't let us enjoy a single moment of any kind of triumph without reminding us how much work we had to do.

Samuelson falls somewhere in between. "This game doesn't mean anything," he starts, and then he grins with that long-muzzled grin that only canids can manage. "Except it does. A win is a win, and I want us to get used to the feel of winning. I'm gonna spend a lot of time reviewing film with my staff to see who gives us the best chance of keeping that winning feeling going. Those of you with an interest in being part of that should be doing the same." He looks around the room at all of us. "Nice job, men. Let's get ready for the next one."

Gerrard grabs me as I'm pulling on my shirt. "Nice work out there," he says. "Come on, a couple of us are going down to Mick's."

I have a couple hours before I'm scheduled to meet Lee. I'd been looking forward to it because it'll be the first time I've seen him since camp started that I won't be completely wiped out by practice. "Is that where the starters hang out?"

He laughs and punches my arm. "I can't invite ya to where the starters go yet," he says. "But keep it up. Maybe in a few weeks. Come on, the defense is all going."

I throw on the rest of my clothes and head off to the parking lot, where we all pile into four cars and head off to a local Irish pub I hadn't known about. We've only been back home for three days since camp ended, so I'm still getting reacquainted with downtown Chevali. This pub is at the north end, in a whole section I never bothered to explore. There's a big room in

the back that they show the guys to, where we all sit down and grab beers and talk about the game. I never see who puts up his credit card for the tab, and in fact at the end of the evening when I offer to pay, I get waved off and laughed at and called 'rook. '

Before that, though, the evening gets interesting and a little scary. It's about an hour, hour and a half after we get there. The biggest worry on my mind is that Killer, down at the other end of the table, keeps talking to a couple of the young guys on the third team and squinting in my direction. I try to ignore him, because Gerrard and Carson are chatting with me, and not with him. But it's at that moment that Fisher comes in.

He sits next to me, unsheathing his claws and tapping them on the pitted wood of the table. "Where you been?" I ask.

"I was on my way out," he says, his voice low. "There was a vixen trying to get into the locker room."

"You're married," I say, but already my fur's prickling.

"Shut up and listen. There were a few rooks hanging around. They started hitting on her, and she started kinda flirting back. I wasn't gonna say anything. It looked harmless."

"Why would you have said anything?" I say, but I already know the answer.

The other guys have moved on to their own conversation. Fisher checks them before going on. "They got the falsies out of "her" dress. Turns out it was a guy in drag."

"Takes all kinds," I force myself to say.

He looks at me steady on. "Sure does," he says. "They were gonna... I dunno what they were gonna do."

"Was it Colin?" I am trying to stop my voice from shaking. I can't tell how successful I am.

Fisher gets a beer slid over to him and snags it with a large, soft paw. "I escorted the young, uh, gentleman out and warned him to be careful what he tries in the future."

Pubs are loud places. I can still hear the pounding of my heart. "Takes all kinds," is all I can think of to say, feebly, again.

"Ain't arguing with that," he says, and now he looks right at me. "Just sayin' that some people oughta think hard about what they got goin' on before they bring it to the locker room."

I want, badly, to ask if he recognized the fox. I actually claw a mark in

the table thinking about it. I can't, I can't, I can't, I tell myself. What a suspicious, stupid question it would be to ask, what a mountain of trouble it would open me up to.

"You hadn't ever seen him around before, had you?" I say.

He looks at me again, takes a drink, and doesn't answer.

I get up. "Gotta take a piss," I say. I walk fast past the bathrooms to the back door and stand just outside it, fumbling with my cell phone. Image after image flashes through my mind: Lee getting pushed around by a bunch of football players, Lee with his dress torn, Colin and the gang of rooks he hangs out with waiting to confront me when I come in tomorrow. And, too, the photo of Brian in the school paper after he was beaten up. It takes me three tries to hit the right speed dial.

He answers on the second ring, after two eternities. "Hey," he says. "Great game."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

I wait. He doesn't say anything else. "You sound tired," I say finally.

"You looked good out there. New position and all."

"Thanks." I start pacing back and forth in the alley. "Did you come down to the locker room after the game?"

Even over the noise in the alley, I can hear the softest whisper of breath in his sigh. I can picture him sitting in his hotel room, holding the phone and closing his eyes. I can see the rise and fall of his chest as he sighs. Because, of course, I'm picturing him naked.

I don't say anything. I let him be ready in his own time. I'm looking up at the stars, which even in the city are pretty amazingly bright. The ground is still warm as I pace. In my mind's eye, he's playing with his tail, the way he does when he doesn't want me to know he doesn't know the answer to something. Finally, he inhales. "Fisher told you?"

"I think he recognized you."

"He didn't say anything to me."

I lean against the wall. "No. He came and said something to me, right away."

"Dammit." He sounds shaken. "I'm sorry."

"Did they hurt you?"

"No." He answers fast. "They weren't going to... I was fine."

"You always say that." Now that I'm no longer worried about him, I'm

starting to feel annoyed. "What if Fisher hadn't been there?"

"They were just horsing around."

I know the look in his eyes right now, the defiant stare I'd be getting if I were in the room. "I'd have thought Brian wouldn't let you forget what football players can do."

"He's got nothing to do with this."

"I didn't say he does."

"Are you going to be able to come see me tonight?" I glance back at the pub. In my mind, he's still naked, and now he's hard, too. "I, uh, I'm out with some of the guys. Might be a little late."

"Well, fine. If you're out with the guys."

There's genuine hurt in his voice. I curse myself for not being able to think about what I say before I say it. "No, I mean, I'll come over. Just give me like an hour?"

"Don't go to any trouble."

"Don't be like that."

He's quiet. I wait. "I'll be here," he says finally.

I go back in and finish my beer, giving Fisher a punch on the shoulder and a muttered, "Thanks." We talk a little more about the game, and then Gerrard starts exchanging stories with Fisher. It kills me to go, because I love listening to them talk about great games and great players, but I can't leave Lee alone in the hotel room for too long, both for his sake and for mine. When we get to a break, I stand up. It turns out that a couple of the other guys are ready to go, so I get a ride to the parking lot and drive over to the hotel.

He's not naked when I get there. Strangely—for us—he doesn't get naked until much later that night. When I first arrive, he answers the door and walks quickly away from it toward the bed. I think I know what's on his mind and I'm about to tell him that maybe we should talk first when he turns and leans on the dresser. "Thanks for coming," he says, his smile forced.

He's changed into a yellow polo shirt and jeans. The polo shirt is soft on my pawpads as I hug him. "You okay?"

"I told you I was." He sounds a bit annoyed, but leans into the hug. "Good to see you."

"Should I check you for bruises?" I poke down his back and rear.

He squirms a bit. "They didn't do anything."

"Did they hurt the blouse? I liked that blouse."

"No." He noses my shoulder. "Let's talk about something else."

He looks a bit sulky when I push back to look down into his eyes.

"Don't come around the locker room in drag again."

"I can—"

"I know you can take care of yourself." Now he shuts his muzzle and looks even sulkier. "Lion Christ, Lee, I don't want to tell you what to do, but why did you even do it?"

"To see you, what do you think?"

"Yeah, but the fucking locker room? It's like you want..." I trail off, not wanting to accuse him directly.

Of course, he gets it. He pushes away from me. "Just because I'm a fox doesn't mean there's some sinister agenda to everything I do."

"So you just wanted to flirt with some pro players?"

He tilts his muzzle, eyes still narrowed. "What, I'm not as pretty as I used to be?"

"I told you. These guys are dangerous, immature..."

He steps back from me, tail curled under his legs. "You were the one who told me Brian was wrong about them."

This isn't the evening I wanted, and I don't think it's the evening he wanted, either. But when he mentions Brian's name, I can't stop myself from saying, "And another thing. What was he doing at the game?"

"He just moved to the area. He likes football." But his ears are back as he says this.

"He doesn't have to sit with you."

"He doesn't know anyone else."

"Doesn't he annoy the shit out of you?"

"I don't know anyone else, either. I can't exactly sit with the players' wives."

He's being deliberately frustrating. I know he doesn't like Brian, but the flash in his eyes tells me he's trying to get at me. No, I don't envy what Brian went through; yes, I feel sorry for him; yes, I understand his beef with football players. Nobody should get put in the hospital no matter how obnoxious they are.

What I can't stand about him is what he did to Lee. They were best friends, back before I met him, and then after that night Brian got beat up, everything went sour. He got bitter, got worse when Lee met me, tried to

break us up a few times, and got so annoying that Lee changed his number without telling him. Where I come from, you don't do that to friends. You have a fight, you maybe scrap a little, but at the end of the day you can always count on each other.

Brian betrayed Lee, far as I'm concerned. So it worries me that Lee's hanging out with him again. He's just setting himself up for another letdown. "What do you guys talk about?"

He shrugs. "Football."

"What's he think of our chances this year?"

"He says you'll go 4-12 again. Out of the playoff chase by Halloween."

"Fuck him."

Now he gets the twitch at the corner of his muzzle that usually means I'm gonna get a smile sometime soon. "He'd like that. He'd take pictures."

I cross the room to sit on the bed, tired of talking about Brian. "Promise me you won't come around the locker room in drag again."

He scowls at the floor. "Fine," he says. I see the tight curling of his tail, the lowering of his eyes, and it sinks into even my thick skull that he probably was pretty scared at that point.

We stay like that, me on the bed, him leaning against the dresser, until I say, "So are you coming over here, or what?"

I get a look and the chance to see the decision going on in his head. When he does come over, it's slowly, with his tail down. I put an arm around him when he sits down, not telling him I'll protect him, not telling him I'll get the asshole who grabbed him (he should know better than to try to fool another fox, though I don't say that either), just being there for him to lean against. After a moment, he does.

"I'm doing better," I say. "If I can just make the team, things'll get slower."

"You won't be free 'til the season's over." He sighs.

"Well, if you wanted someone year-round, you shouldn't have gotten involved with a football player." He looks sharply at me, so I add, "But I'm glad you did."

His eyes soften. "It's not exactly what I pictured."

"When?"

"Oh." He rests a paw on my leg, scratches idly. "When we used to talk about the future. Me and the FLAG guys." He adds that last part for my

benefit, because of course he means him and Brian. "I said I was going to move to Freestone and marry some actor and we were going to live in a stone cottage and have three cockatoos."

I try not to giggle, unsuccessfully. He gives me a sharp look. I try to look innocent, and, again, fail. "That's so... gay," I say.

"Well," he says, "you did know I was gay when we started going out, right? There's the whole thing where I love cock."

"I know, but... cockatoos?"

"Sometimes it was canaries."

"Oh, so there was flexibility."

"What do you like?"

"I'm partial to gray parrots. Good manly birds."

He grins. "We can get a parrot if you want."

I rub his shoulder. "I can't move to Freestone, though. Unless I get traded."

"You don't want to play for them anyway. They make players pay for their own uniform cleaning."

"You serious?" He nods. I flip my tail back, brushing his on the bed. "I don't know where you hear this stuff."

"Amazing what scouts from other teams will say after a few drinks."

I trail my claws down his arm. He shivers and snuggles closer. "You really want that?"

"You to clean your own uniform?"

I poke his side. "The stone cottage, the cockatoos."

"They could be parrots." I snuffle his ear. "I don't know. I thought I did, but I think it might've been one of those things you want because everyone expects you to want it. You know?" I don't answer. He goes on. "Like Salim said he just wanted someone from Delhia, and Allen just wanted someone to go to raves with, and all of us not thinking about what we really wanted, just what it would be appropriate for us to want."

"What did Brian want?"

He doesn't look at me. His paw doesn't stop moving on my leg. "I don't remember."

It was a stupid question for me to ask. "I wanted a big family, a house in the suburbs, a steady job."

"You didn't want to play football?"

I laugh. "More than anything. But my — everyone told me it wasn't

gonna happen." I nuzzle him. "Even you."

"Only at first."

It's a game night, so I don't have a curfew for once, a rare exception. I feel the tension of the week melting away, just sitting with him and talking about what's going on in the world, what's going on with people we know, what the new restaurants in Hilltown are like, and so on. When we don't feel like talking any more, we cuddle quietly for a nice long time.

Then we get naked.

Fisher avoids me for another week. I'm busy enough with my assignments and studying and working with the second team (which earns me a little "woohoo" from Lee over the phone) that I don't really notice until after our second pre-season game when I'm at Mick's with the guys and I look around and think, jeez, I haven't talked to Fisher in a week. Of course, being in Mick's spurs the right memory for me to figure out why.

Lee couldn't make it to this game; his whole office was at the Dragons' game in Millenport, a team outing. But he promised to watch on Monday. One of the perks of his job is that their office tapes all of every game and he can just go check it out of the library when he feels like it. Even without him in the stands, I did well, feeling more relaxed with the guys, more comfortable with Gerrard, and more like I fit in overall. The coyote with the ragged ear, Dix, is the second team's Mike (middle linebacker), the one I work most closely with. Between him and Gerrard, in the third week at my new position, things are finally starting to make sense. I'm finding I like the flexibility of it, sometimes dropping back to cover receivers who aren't going to blow past me, and sometimes coming up to attack the play at the lines.

It's that last part that I have to work on. I'm used to letting the play come to me. Defending running plays means a lot more hunting on my part, watching to make sure the running back has the ball, guessing where he's going, and avoiding his teammates on my way to him. I'm not good at that last part, not at first, so I get blindsided a lot. I work hard, though.

To my surprise, Gerrard and Carson approach me after the second game and tell me they want to start practicing with me, extra sessions after regular practice. Even though the idea of doing more work after our regular practice is crazy, I leap at the chance. "Why aren't you practicing with Corey?" I ask them.

Carson snorts. He never says much. Gerrard just says, "We're practicing with you," and that's the end of it. Nobody ever tells me what's going on. In this case, though, I don't care. They drive me harder than Steez does, but they also make it easier to learn. I start feeling like we have a rapport, and I see the three of us trotting out onto the field, the starting linebackers unit. I hold onto that vision to keep me going through the extra hour and a half workout every day.

The third pre-season game, I only get hit once, and I save a couple big runs. Lee watches from the stands, in jeans and a green polo shirt, with Brian nowhere around. The fourth and last pre-season game is in Port City. I play less, as the starters are getting up to speed now, but I'm really growing into the position. Steez pats me as I jog off the field at the end of the game, even though we lose. After a nap at the hotel, I feel pretty happy, so I decide to go track down a restaurant Lee recommended to me for a nice dinner.

Walking out into the lobby, I nearly run into Fisher. "Hey," he says. "Got a minute?"

"Sure. I'm just heading to dinner. You eaten?"

He shakes his head, falling into step beside me through the door and out onto the street. It's actually cool up here, a welcome change from the relentless heat of Chevali, though it is more humid.

We have one of those silences where you're waiting for the other guy to start talking and hoping he doesn't. Finally, I break it. "Fisher..."

"There's a team dinner Sunday night," he says. "For the start of the season, for the guys who make the team."

My ears perk up. "I made the final roster?"

He waves away my concern. "You will. I saw you play out there today. Not that there was much doubt."

"I had doubt." I can't help but look across to the skyscrapers of downtown Port City. It's only my third time here, and I've never actually been downtown. They look majestic, pushing upwards against the sky full of stars.

"Not me." He links his paws behind his back, staring down the street. "You're a smart kid. Make good decisions."

"Thanks." I'm not sure now what he's going on about. I'd thought this was going to be about something else. And he's not smiling or patting me on the shoulder like he normally would if he'd just come up to give me

good news.

"You can bring a date to the dinner." Oh. Now I get it. "So I just wanted to say, if you need a date, Gena's got a couple friends who'd go with you."

"Thanks," I say, "but I think I'm okay."

"They're both nice, single tigers. Trish is even about your age."

"Really, I'm okay." I don't know what to say to him.

Fisher slows to keep pace with me. "If you want, I know a 'service' that has some sweet girls. Least, they usedta be." He's not looking at me and his ears are halfway back.

I wish there were some way for me to just end this conversation. "I'm not going to bring anyone."

"You should," he says. "It'd look good. Just... you need to bring someone..."

"Lion Christ, just say it. Bring a girl, that's what you mean, right?"

His ears go all the way back. "Yeah."

I stare at the glossy marble of the shops we're walking past. I can see my reflection looking morosely back at me. "I already told... her... not to come around anymore, okay? I wouldn't invite her to the dinner." Lee's gonna be furious. But he can't come to the dinner, he just can't be around the team-Someone would recognize him.

"All right" he says. "Hey, this... this don't mean nothin' about you an' me."

"Bullshit." That jerks him around to stare at me. I see him behind me, reflected in the marble. "We talked about every other week in the offseason, and now you just haven't wanted to talk to me for the last few weeks?"

"I been busy trying to make the team, same as you." He tries to put on an angry expression.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Thanks for the advice." I accelerate my pace, walking around the corner with no specific destination. He catches me easily and grabs me by the arm.

"I put a lot of work into helpin' you stick around. I didn't want to see you throw it away."

I wrench my arm away. "Don't lecture me."

We glare at each other, face to face. The anger in his eyes is genuine now. "Shut up and listen. You ever hear of Tony Calhoun?"

"No."

"Course not," he hisses, voice lowered. "He was a bear, started a couple years before me in the league. When I came up, a coupla guys told me a story about him — he wasn't playing no more. He was queer, didn't make too much effort to hide it. Well, they dragged it when he was on the field. Told coach he was a distraction. He wasn't great, but he was good enough to make a team, if those guys woulda shut up and played." Fisher pokes me in the chest with a finger. "They bragged about it, how they ran him outta the league."

I look to either side. The street's busy, a few people glancing at us as they stroll by. I don't think anyone heard him. "That was fifteen years ago," I say. "And I'm not him. I already told Lee... I told her... I told *him* not to come around any more. You think I want trouble?" I feel anger welling up in me. It should be a relief to have my secret out, to Fisher, the one guy on the team I would've chosen to tell if I had to. But he's taking it all wrong, making it harder, not easier.

"I don't know what you want."

"I want to play football and for people to leave me the fuck alone."

He steps back. "Okay," he says. "I just wanted to make sure."

"Oh, and another thing," I say, turning to leave. "If I had any thoughts about maybe telling anyone else on the team, you've managed to convince me of what a horrible idea that would be. So congratulations."

He stalks after me, grasping at my arm and missing. "It is a horrible idea, that's what I've been trying to say."

"You think everyone is as bigoted as you?"

Now he snarls, but I'm snarling too, not prepared to back down. "I already told you, it don't matter to me what you do on your own time. I'm looking out for the team."

"Yeah, yeah, doesn't matter to you." I wave him dismissively away. "That's why you haven't talked to me in three weeks. That's why you can't talk about this shit without dancing around it. That's why you had to make extra-double-sure that I didn't bring him," I spit the word at him, "to the dinner. Tell me something, Fish. When they bragged about kicking that poor guy out of the league, did you laugh and say, 'Good job?'"

It's unfair, and I know it's unfair, but it feels good when I say it. All the anger drains from his muzzle and he stares at me, mouth open. I leave him there and stomp back to the hotel, and he lets me go with only a

shouted, "Hey! Hey, fuck you!" over my shoulder as I go. I grab a greasy fast food burger to go and take it back to the room, hoping for fuck's sake that Charm isn't there so I can curl up and feel sorry for myself 'til I fall asleep.

Ogleby, with his impeccable sense of timing, calls the next day to tell me he's finally set up a meeting with this panther, whatever her name is, Charlene or Charlotte. She's supposed to be at a spa in Date Springs, an hour flight away, and he wants me to go there and just run into her. I tell him to fuck off, that I'm not going to fly to Date Springs just to meet some bimbo he wants me to take around. He gets agitated, in that squeaky ferrety way he has, and I tell him she can fucking well come to Chevali if she wants to meet me, and I hang up on him, because right now he's the only person in the world I can do that to.

On the day the last round of cuts is announced, I'm out on the field, tossing the ball around with the other backup linebackers, not sitting in my room holding my tail like the twenty guys who think they're on the fence. Making the cut is a huge weight off my mind, even though I know a starting position is way off in the future. I'll probably at least be able to play in garbage time, and if I work hard and show the coaches something good, who knows?

By now, three of the rookies who cornered Lee in the locker room are gone, I tell him on my cell phone when we talk. We make plans to have dinner to celebrate me making the team a week from Monday night, a night without curfew since we have Tuesdays off until the season starts. I've closed on a condo downtown and it should be set up by then. He asks why not come down for the weekend, since we don't have a game, and I clearly remember intending not to tell him why even as my stupid mouth was saying the words, "there's this big dinner thing for everyone who made the team."

"Can I go?" he asks immediately.

"Lots of guys aren't taking a date," I say. If we were together in person, he'd know right away that I was lying.

"Come on," he says back. "I'll buy a new dress and everything."

"Yeah," I say. "Fisher came to talk to me about that."

He's silent for a moment. "So he definitely knows?"

"Probably," I say. "Hell, the whole team knows, now."

"It was only five guys," he says. "Two, now. And they don't know I

was with you."

"Colin's still on the team."

"Trust me, I'll look completely different. I'll even fool Fisher."

"No, you won't!" I press the phone to my ear, pacing more quickly. "Because you're not coming."

"I promise I won't go anywhere near the locker room."

"I don't want you playing 'dress up and fool the football players' anywhere," I hiss.

He snorts. "How about you introduce me as the lucky fan who won the chance to have dinner with the mighty Devlin Miski? You won't have to show any affection at all."

I trace a paw along the window glass, looking out at the evening falling over the White Sands University campus. My room overlooks a common area much like the Forester U. lawn. I miss that lawn, the soft bed of grass and the gentle breeze ruffling my fur as I lay back and looked up at the sky. "What do you want me to do? Come out to the team? Come out to the press? You think a second-string converted linebacker can pull that off?"

"It's not about your position," he says. "It's about who you are."

"Oh, yeah? Who am I, doc?"

There's a moment of silence. "You're Devlin Miski," he says, quietly.

Below me, in the common area, students who have arrived early for the fall term are relaxing and mingling. There's a weasel pair, boy and girl, talking with a stallion and a desert rat who are also, obviously, a couple. I've known couples like that, the guy two feet taller and a hundred pounds heavier than the girl, the butt of jokes. The ones I've known didn't care, and from the smiles I can see from my window, it looks like these two don't, either. "Can Devlin Miski pull that off?"

"It's got to start somewhere," he says. "It's got to start with someone."

His voice sounds as tired as I feel. "That sounds like Brian talking," I say.

"He's not wrong all the time," Lee says.

"Maybe not," I say, "but his average sucks."

He's quiet for another heartbeat or three. "Have fun at the dinner," he says. "I gotta get up early for work."

I stare out the window after that for a long time, watching the kids laugh, talk, hold paws. They look so young, and so confident. We don't

choose who to fall in love with. Sometimes nature doesn't fit nicely and neatly into the rest of your life. It'd be easy to be a football player if I were a straight womanizer like Charm. Of course, he's a natural at what he does, too. He's one of the guys who exudes confidence from every pore, him and the stallion down there on the sandy commons, his arm resting on the shoulders of his desert rat girlfriend, both of them laughing like they haven't a care in the world.

The following week of practice is pretty loose, but intense at the same time. Coach Samuelson visits each of the separate group practices in turn, barking at us about a lack of energy, a lack of urgency, but none of us miss the wagging of his tail. We've ended the pre-season 2-2, but the pre-season doesn't mean anything, as any coach will tell you. Ours will tell you that with such upbeat grins that you can read their excitement over the progress of the team.

I stick mostly to the second-string defense in practices, but Gerrard and Carson keep up the extra sessions with me. I start to wonder if they think I'll be playing with them before too long. Killer either doesn't know about the extras or doesn't care, but he knows something is up and he avoids me, which is fine because it saves me the trouble of avoiding him.

Snaps was cut in the last round, which makes our celebration a little bittersweet. Charm and I want to take him out for drinks that night, but he says his agent has a couple teams interested in him and he wants to jump before they change their minds. We promise to stay in touch, and can't see him off to the airport because we've got practice. When we get back, he's gone. So it goes, I say, and Charm tells me that what I need to cheer me up is a lot of naked ladies.

It's actually the very next day that I'm coming off the practice field and this gorgeous black panther in a sleek red dress comes up to me, ignoring my teammates. "You must be Dev," she purrs, and when I confirm that, she extends a paw. "Glad to finally meet you."

She's slightly shorter than me. Her figure's perfect, her expression soft and alluring. Her light blue eyes are wide and clear. I try to remember what Charm says to his girls. "Thanks for being a fan."

Her paw is cool and firm. She laughs. "Clearly, you're not. I'm Caroll Chavon. I think my flea talked to your flea?"

"Oh, you're that actress," I say.

Colin, the rookie wideout, was behind me coming off the field and stops to gawk, along with a few others. "You were in 'Soft Touches, '" he says. She looks at him, and his ears go down all funny and he mumbles, "I think."

A coyote and deer are staring openly at her chest. She takes in the attention, but only for a second. "Shoo, fellas, I'm only here for Dev." She waves at them and they walk on, though I see them looking back at her ass.

"Thanks," I say. "That'll make me popular."

"This'll make you more popular," she says. "That's the idea, isn't it?"

"I guess so." I shake my head. "I don't understand half the things Ogleby does."

"And he doesn't understand a tenth of the things you do. That's why you're playing football and he's the bloodsucker."

I squint at her. "You like agents, don't you?"

"My first one tried to take fifty percent of my pay and only got me porno film gigs." She sees my look and shakes her head. "I didn't take any of 'em. Save yourself the time. My second agent said he'd give me more money if I'd sleep with him. My third agent dumped me when I didn't make him a millionaire in a year. So I'm on number four now, older and wiser." The whole soft and innocent look is gone, remarkably. She's turned so the sun is no longer behind her and I can see steel grey in the blue of her eyes.

"You don't look that old." There, the first thing I've said that was remotely appropriate.

She smiles, brushes a paw down the dress. "Thanks. So we'll look good together on Sunday."

"Sunday?" It takes me a minute. "The team dinner?"

"You have a team function, we're supposed to be seen together, makes sense."

Heat builds in my chest. "Did Fisher set you up for this?"

"Who's Fisher? I told you, my flea talked to yours. In fact," she says as we start walking back toward the locker room, "you're supposed to join me for dinner tonight, too. The Xeric Lounge."

"What?" I feel like just when I'm getting a handle on things, I find out that there are patterns and plays I didn't even know were in the book.

She laughs. "Your flea obviously doesn't talk to you as much as mine does."

"I think he's afraid to call me."

She gives my bicep a nice squeeze. "I would be too, if I made you mad. I hear good things about Xeric. It's the place to be if you're unfortunate enough to be in this place."

I sigh. "Okay." At least it'll be a better excuse for Charm than anything else I could come up with.

"Please." She puts a paw to my chest. I'm impressed by the firmness in that simple touch. "Try to restrain your excitement."

It's so dry that I have to laugh. "I'm sorry, it's just..."

She shakes her head. "No, look, it's fine. It's just funny." Her eyes sweep over the field. "Half those guys would give their left nut to get the dinner invitation you just got, and you're all 'I guess.'"

"It's nothing about you," I say. "I just don't really know you."

"It is refreshing to hear you mean that not in the Biblical sense."

I search for an appropriate response to that before realizing how sincere she is. "I'm looking forward to dinner," I say.

"Think of it," she says, teeth showing in a dazzling smile as she lets me get to the locker room, "as an arranged marriage."

"I've seen her tits," is the first thing Charm says when I tell him why I can't go to the strip club with him.

"At this point," I say, "I'd be surprised if you hadn't."

"Oh-Four," he says. "Can't remember which month. It was, um, one of those cats-only magazines."

"Congratulations."

"Are they still perky?"

"Shut up," I say, "and tell me if my tie is straight."

He straightens the tie for me. "Where you goin'? I'm gonna take out that cheerleader, maybe we could double."

"Xeric Lounge," I say. "Which cheerleader?"

Charm cups his hands about a foot in front of his chest. "You know, *that* one." He shakes his head. "But I ain't takin' her to the Xeric. She ain't that good-looking."

I smirk. "How good-looking would she have to be?"

"For the Xeric?" He reaches into the open drawer beside his bed and pulls out a magazine, flipping it open to a centerfold of a naked female cheetah lifting her huge breasts with her paws.

"Thanks," I say. "Got it."

"You can keep this one if you want," he says, offering the magazine to me. "Case she don't put out."

"That's okay." I hold up a paw. "I'm good."

I haven't been to many places that are the "place to be." They always make me wonder who decided to be there first. Maybe the Xeric Lounge paid them so other people would follow. It's pretty, sure, modeled after a desert oasis, all brown sandstone with a fake palm on each table and a "lake" in the middle of the dining area. On an island in the middle of the lake, a band of kangaroo rats is playing some kind of soft melody. The waiters are all dressed in starched taupe shirts with shimmering copper ties, and they're all fennec foxes, oryxes, or desert hares, as far as I can see.

Caroll's changed into a silky kind of dress that only covers one shoulder and has folds draped around it. It looks like it should fall off her at a moment's notice, and maybe that's what it's designed to look like. She looks great in it.

"Don't worry about dinner," she says. "My flea's paying for it."

"Where do you keep a credit card in that thing?" I ask. She winks. "Let's just say that if the waiter is a guy, sometimes he forgets to run it."

I blink. "Wow."

She stares at me. "I'm kidding. Purse." She holds up a little matching thing with mother-of-pearl clasps, about as large as her paw.

I chuckle at myself. "I'm not sure what I was imagining."

"I'm pretty sure," she says. "Guys aren't hard to figure out."

"You'd think so."

She raises an eyebrow. "Well, that's the whole point, isn't it? Of this." She waves at the lounge.

I look at the kangaroo rat band, the waiters, the sandstone. "To attract guys?"

"No, no. I mean you and me. It's supposed to make you more interesting to guys, because you can attract a beautiful lady panther, right?" We've gotten our drinks. She has some tropical fruit concoction that she swirls and takes a sip from. "How's your cactus martini?"

I try it. "It's about what I imagine a cactus would taste like. What about your fans?"

"Oh, for me it's just supposed to make me more famous so I get more fans. That way the studios will be more likely to cast me, and so on. You

know how it is."

I nod, and then realize that I don't. So I ask her about it, and she tells me about the sleazy but pretty fascinating world of the lower echelons (her word) of Hollywood. Then she asks me about football, so I give her as much detail as I can about the life of a lower echelon of football player. We snack on something fried with coconut and something else with pineapple, which turns out to be the whole of her meal. She's patient while I chow down a salmon steak, refuses my offer to share ice cream, and still we manage to leave the lounge on time for the mob of paparazzi (her word) that have been alerted to our dinner together.

The mob is one guy with a camera, a foul-smelling pronghorn who takes a couple pictures and then asks us to spell our names for him. Carroll watches him leave, and then says, "Oh, well. Next time there'll be more. You're okay with there being a next time, right?"

"Sure. I had a great time." I do a clumsy little bow. "So you're going to be my date for the dinner on Sunday?"

She laughs. "Are you asking? Yes, I'll be your date. I had a good time."

We arrange to meet and drive to the dinner together. I notice her giving me a strange look as we part, but I've no idea what I might have done wrong, I can't figure it out. Women, I think. It's been too long since I was on a date. It's shocking when I actually think about it, because I went on so many dates up until I met Lee. After that, none. Well, a couple kind of pointless ones where I was trying to convince myself that I wasn't gay. I don't remember my stomach being in knots like this after any of them.

Going out with Carroll felt like reliving the best parts of those times, the enjoyment of meeting someone new without the pressure of wondering if we'd end up in bed, or wondering how good she'd be if we did. And even if there weren't this artificiality, she's more mature than any girl I dated in college. I could hold hands with her in public, kiss her in the locker room, talk to the guys about her. I could take her back to my place and tell my friends I'm doing it. It'd be so much... less hard.

Shit, I can't think like this. I pound my fist against the wall, not caring if I leave a mark or not. My heart clenches and I flip over, lying face down on the bed, tail thrashing. I try to get to sleep without thinking of either Carroll or Lee.

The next day is the first one I can move into my loft. It's in a brand-

new development in Chevali, part of a converted warehouse district. It's great because I can walk to the downtown area, it's a short drive to the stadium, and nobody else on the team lives nearby. Charm has a ten-bedroom mansion somewhere that he's only seen a tenth of. The loft is just big enough to be roomy for me, with high ceilings and tall windows, a spectacular view of the downtown from one side, the suburbs and distant mountains on the other. Real jagged desert mountains, not the green rolling hills of Hilltown.

Ogleby took care of moving everything from my Hilltown place. It feels weird to walk in with the two suitcases I had at training camp and see all my stuff in there, set up as if I'd lived there forever. I actually get nostalgic for that apartment as I unpack, remembering the good times I had there, mostly with Lee.

I hope he'll like the new place. The bedroom still has that college dorm look to it: posters of music stars and old football players all over the walls, stereo on my old dresser, everything but the cinder-block bookshelf. It would feel completely mine if it weren't for the bars on the ceiling, the remnants of a previous tenant who was probably a bat or a possum or some other species that hangs to sleep. I asked Ogleby to get some new furniture for the living room and dining room, and magically, it's happened. The only thing I picked out in the living room is the TV. The dining room is completely foreign. They look a lot more tasteful than I feel I could possibly have managed. Lee will appreciate them.

I lay on my college bed, which still feels like mine, from the texture of the sheets to the scents worked into it from five years, and I think about Lee, as I often do, because his scent is nearly as strong as mine on the bed. He's fifteen hundred miles away, and I'm moved into my new place here in the southwest. I know it isn't permanent — nothing is, in this league — but it feels a hell of a lot more permanent than living out of two suitcases at a college dorm. I shove that aside and focus on coming up with good ways to tell him that I'm taking Carroll to the dinner. As I fall asleep, the best I've come up with is not to do it at all.

For a week I put off any questions about the dinner. I don't even want to talk about Carroll, because as smart as Lee is, he'll figure out I'm taking her. I don't get much chance to talk to him anyway; we're practicing only once a day now, but we've got study sessions that take just as long, not to mention the extra sessions with Gerrard and Carson. He's busy too, with

the college season in full swing. The Dragons have him flying off to one coast to watch a Saturday afternoon game, then a flight to catch a Saturday night game an hour south. He calls me at the end of that last game to talk and to unwind from his day, at the end of which we're both panting, mostly naked, sticky, and sad that we're three time zones apart.

Mercifully, he doesn't mention the dinner. We talk about what we'll do on Monday, about my new place and the restaurants downtown we want to try. He'll be sleeping in and then traveling all day Sunday, so I sign off by telling him I'll see him at the airport on Monday. It's one of the rare times I can pick him up, since we have the whole day off.

So Sunday, I'm in a pretty good mood all through practice, which ends early so we can get ready for the dinner. I have exactly one formal outfit, a grey business suit that I wore to the draft, and I think that'll do for the dinner until Caroll shows up downstairs in a peacock-blue dress that shimmers in the light, with matching bangles around her neck and dangling from either ear. She's even shaded her fur with blue highlights, I see when the light catches it just right. And let me tell you, I can remember when my heart would've just about stopped to have a panther that gorgeous paying attention to me — not to mention what effect it would've had on other parts.

She looks at my suit. She doesn't say anything. I brush some of the fur off it, pick off a speck of lint, and then clear my throat. "Um, ready?"

In response, she smiles. "Do we have half an hour to spare?"

I glance back at the door of my apartment. "Um, I don't know..."

"I'm not asking to be invited upstairs," she says, but her eyes flick to the door as well. "No, there's a place I know about a couple blocks from here. We could get you fitted for a nice tux in about half an hour. That okay?"

"Oh." I check my watch. "Yeah, sure."

Twenty-nine minutes later, decked out in the most comfortable tux I've ever worn and the first I've ever owned, we're back in my car and on our way to the Tivoli, the four-star hotel next to the stadium. "Not there," she says when I head for the parking garage. "Use the valet parking."

I don't really understand why, but I follow her instructions, including the whispered "slip him a five" when I hand my key over to the grey fox in the red uniform. There's a small knot of reporters hanging out around the entrance, including our friend the desultory (her word) pronghorn. Flashes

go off, but nobody pays much attention to us or asks us any specific questions, and the thunderstorm of flashes that goes off behind us when another car pulls up tells me just how much we matter.

"It's Aston," I tell her. "Come on, let's get to our table."

"Who?" she asks as we follow the signs with the Firebird logo on them.

"Aston's the quarterback. He's pretty good for a glamour boy. You'll have seen pictures of him: the wolf with the white blaze down his forehead."

"Oh!" She cranes her neck back. "Is he dating Cheri Ringtail?"

"Maybe." I maneuver through the crowded lobby. None of the fans holding out autograph books recognize me. "Hey, Charm."

The stallion waves from the center of a cooing crowd of mixed-species females. His eyes stop when he spots Carroll. A moment later, he pulls his jaw shut and gives me a broad smile and a hearty thumbs-up. Some of the women around him turn and stare too, considerably less pleasantly. Then he makes a circle with his other hand and sticks the thumb through it. I steer Carroll away from him.

"You don't know Cheri Ringtail?" she says as we enter the ballroom. She rattles off some movies that Cheri Ringtail starred in; the rides ring a bell, though I haven't seen any of them. I only half-hear them anyway, because I'm scanning the room for a table with someone I know. Many of the tables are already full: Gerrard and Carson are together with some of the other linebackers, and the rest of the linebacking crew is at a table with some open spaces, but Killer's there, so I pass over it. Other players are wandering in and sitting down, so I finally pick a mostly-empty table in the hope that Charm will find his way over to it when he's done with his gaggle of fans.

The only other couple at the table are Colin Smith and a shy vixen in a light pink silk dress that almost wilts when Carroll sits down. "Gramps, isn't it?" Colin says with a grin. "And I remember the lady, of course." I take the seat next to him and try not to think of how he reminds me of Lee. Too late, I remember that Colin was one of the rookies harassing Lee in drag, one of the ones who survived the cut. I don't know what he did or who the ringleader was, though. Maybe he was just watching. I don't feel too kindly disposed toward him, but I can't change tables now.

"You wanna get me some wine, rook?" I grin toothily back at him.

He looks across me to Caroll as he gets up. "Anything for you, ma'am?"

"Same," she says. When he's gone, she shakes her head. "You can just order him around like that?"

"He's a rookie," I say. "First year in the league. I got the same thing when I came in last year. Believe me, getting drinks is far from the worst thing he'll have to do."

"This year?"

"Tonight." I grin.

Caroll looks across the table to the vixen and rolls her eyes. "Boys, eh? No matter how you dress them up, they're still on the playground at recess. Hi, I'm Caroll."

"Oh, I know," the vixen says in a soft voice. "I read 'People. '"

Caroll sits up a little straighter. "And you are?"

"Penelope. Just Penelope." She looks around the room and then down at her place setting again.

"How long have you known Colin?"

"We were high school sweethearts." I can barely hear her across the table.

Caroll beams. "That's adorable," she says. "He's a lucky fox."

Penelope shakes her head. "I'm the lucky one."

"Nonsense," Colin says, returning with a wine glass each for me and Caroll. He sits, and nuzzles Penelope's ear affectionately. "She's the one keeps me grounded. So easy to get lost and ridden off track by agents and people who just want to take advantage of you. Right, hon? She doesn't let me lose sight of any of that."

"Cool," I say. My wine is white, a chardonnay by the smell of it. That makes me think of Lee as much as the "lucky fox" comment did. And as if I didn't have enough foxes to think about, another one heads toward the table, dragging a vixen behind him. Ty Nakamura, a vulpine wide receiver also in his rookie year, greets Colin with a high five, and plops down on the other side of Penelope, ogling Caroll openly. The vixen with him doesn't seem to mind. She sits down and immediately takes out a small compact to examine her fur. I don't have to ask him to know that the two of them haven't known each other since high school. I'd be surprised if he's known her longer than an hour.

"I think you're both lucky," Caroll says to Colin and Penelope. "To

have found someone special and been able to hold on to them is something very precious in this day and age."

Both their ears flick in that adorable fox-blushing way. Colin says, "I always say, a good football player needs a good lady to be his best."

"Sure," Ty chimes in, "and a great football player needs three or four." He laughs, seemingly unconcerned that nobody else is joining him. I gotta admit, though, I'm smiling.

"I'm gonna get some wine," his vixen announces.

"Knock yourself out," he says. As she gets up, he grabs her tail and lets it run through his paw. "Sweet, eh?" he says across the table to me.

"She's pretty," I concede.

Colin puts his paw over Penelope's and clears his throat to get Carroll's attention. "So are you going to keep this old man straight?" he asks, gesturing to me.

The choice of words makes me glare at him, but he's fortunately distracted by Carroll and doesn't notice. I study him while Carroll answers and decide it was just the way he talks, that he didn't put anything together with his meeting Lee in drag. "We're still very casual, just learning about each other before we make any further commitments. I know," she says to Penelope, drawing my attention over there in time to see the vixen's widened eyes, "I'm not your typical Hollywood starlet."

Penelope shakes her head. "You're as pretty as any of the rest of them," Colin says.

"You're smokin'," Ty agrees, with a wink at me.

Colin ignores him. "It's so nice to meet someone whose morals are more than just things you claim to have in public."

"To be fair," Carroll says, "if you take those gossip rags at their word, we're breaking up and making up every three days. Most of the ladies I know are much less, shall we say, active."

"Hey," Ty says, "don't ruin my fantasies." He turns around in the chair, scanning the room. "How long does it take to get wine?"

Penelope blushes again. "I'm sorry," the vixen says, "I know I shouldn't read them..."

"Oh, of course you should," Carroll says. "Excellent wine, by the way, thank you, sir." She inclines her head to Colin. "They're great entertainment. You just need to keep in mind that they aren't about real people."

"You look pretty real," Colin says.

Caroll shakes her head. "I am. But the Caroll Chavon in the magazine isn't. She's a fabrication by people who want to believe that we're both better and worse than they are. They elevate us and tear us down."

"You wouldn't believe what they wrote about Colin his senior year," Penelope speaks up. "They said he'd taken money and lied about it. It was terrible. As if he would ever do something like that."

Colin's ears go flat and he nods. I feel a little more sympathetic to him. "It's the same thing with us," I say. "We were talking about that the other night." It seems rather mercenary to add that we were discussing how to use that to our advantage, and not really the right thing to say to two foxes whose ears are innocent enough to flick when they're told how lucky they are to be together.

Ty's vixen comes back with a half-full glass of wine, her nose halfway down in it, muzzle already stained with red. Ty says, "We got all that in the rookie briefing. Y'just have to be really bland and don't say anything but meaningless crap to them, and ignore whatever they try to pin on you. What, nothing for me?"

His vixen swallows another gulp of the wine. "Get your own," she says. "I ain't a waitress."

"You see this?" Ty laughs. "Women."

While Caroll and Penelope glare at him, and Colin says something proper and disapproving, I spot Fisher walking across the room, Gena a step behind him. His eyes meet mine for a moment, then we both look away at the same time. He goes to another table. Ours fills up with another rookie, a bear I know only as Brick, a defensive tackle whose real name turns out to be Usher Partchan. Like Ty's date, the pretty female bear with Brick is, as Lee would say, running a meter.

But the ladies keep mostly quiet while Ty and Brick and Colin talk about rookie stuff. I chime in with my experiences from last year when I'm not talking quietly to Caroll. She's interested in the world of football, or at least is good at pretending, enough that she's the one who shushes me when Coach Samuelson gets up to give a speech.

I don't remember all the words, but it's a big-game-motivating speech, except for the whole season. Coach Gallick never did that at Hilltown; neither did Coach Kimble at Forester. Everyone in the room, or at least at our table, gets pretty fired up. Ty jumps to his feet at the end and pumps

his fist. Across the room, I see Charm do the same. Then everyone's getting up and cheering. The way we feel right at that minute, we can beat anyone. A championship is a dead lock.

The excited buzz in the room settles down as the waiters bring in dinner, which consists largely of a lot of steak. At our table, a small competition breaks out over who can finish the most the fastest. Brick has an advantage, being a bear, but talking about handicapping would waste precious eating time, so we just shovel the food down, barely taking the time to cut bite-sized pieces.

"Disgusting," Caroll says, watching me chew as fast as I can.

I swallow. "Us or the steak?"

"You," she says, "though the steak isn't really top-notch either."

"Didn't notice," I mumble, my mouth already full again.

She shakes her head, as Brick raises a paw to a waiter to ask for another steak.

He ends up being the only one to ask for three, so even though he doesn't finish the third one, he's declared the winner. I finish two, somehow. Colin and Ty both get through a few bites of their second before giving up. Piles of potatoes and salad get pushed to the center of the table as we all lean back in the comfortable haze of digesting. I even feel more kindly disposed toward Colin. He was probably just hanging around with the other rookies. He's too nice to have been the one harassing Lee.

There's a break before dessert. We talk, slowly, while the coaches make their way around the room. I watch Coach Samuelson visit nearly every other table before stopping at ours. "How we doing, men?" he says, arms folded, tail ticking from side to side like a metronome. "Good steak?"

"Urrrgh," we generally reply.

"You men are the future of this team," he says, leaning closer. "We have a lot of confidence in you. You're going to start participating this year, but your biggest contributions will be down the line. What I'm going to ask of you this year is to learn as much as you can. Keep your eyes and ears open.

He looks right at me. "Miski, you're setting a great example for the rest of them. Learning a new position, as quickly as Coach Mikilios tells me you're coming along, you're gonna be helping anchor a squad of linebackers as good as anyone else in the league."

I feel a glow that has nothing to do with steak. At that moment, I

believe I am the best in the league. "Thanks," I say.

He says nice words about the rooks, Colin especially, and then moves on to another table. The four of us exchange looks that shift into big smiles, so I know they all feel the same way I do. The girls don't quite get it. "You boys," Carroll says. "I know we actors are supposed to have fragile egos, but we don't need the director to come pump us up at the beginning of a movie shoot."

"Maybe he should," Brick says, and then Ty asks why Carroll said "actors" instead of "actresses" and that discussion lasts through the dessert course.

We get up from the table and mill around when the dessert is taken away. I don't specifically avoid Fisher, but Carroll and I don't run into him. We spend some time talking with Gerrard and his wife. Carson's come solo, one of the few guys who did. Carroll gets along with everyone and even coaxes a few words out of Carson, to my amazement. Charm sweeps through and slaps me on the back at one point, pointing to Carroll behind her back and cupping his massive hands in front of his chest. I roll my eyes at him.

As the evening wears on, Gerrard and Carson start to talk about when to leave. "Wait 'til Jaws and Aston go," Gerrard's wife says. "They'll keep everyone busy."

"Maybe I want to sign a few autographs," Gerrard says. He grins at me. "One of the perks of starting, you know."

"A few," his wife says, "fine, but if you want to tuck the kids in, you can't stay for an hour like you did at the Police Benefit last month."

Gerrard's ears fold back a bit, making his grin look abashed. "I have a duty to my fans."

"Yes, yes. Ten minutes, no more. Look, there goes Aston. Let's get our things."

Carson and I grin at each other as the coyotes take their leave. Carroll shakes her head. "Football players," she sighs. "So when should we leave?"

"Doesn't matter," I say. "Backups don't get much attention. Whenever you're ready."

"We're trying to change that, remember," she says in a low voice. "Let me see when the reporters will be ready." She checks her phone.

"They'll be ready all evening," I say.

"For me, I mean." She flips through messages.

Carson raises his paw. "Heading out too," he says, and punches my arm. "See you Tuesday."

Caroll snaps her phone shut and drops it into her purse. "Let's grab our things," she says.

"Was I right?" I pester her as we walk back to our table, her in the lead.

"Anytime?"

She looks back over her shoulder at me. "They're ready for me now..."

"What does that even mean?" I step up alongside her. "You just want to make sure that pronghorn is there?"

"When we become bigger news, he'll be the one with the story since the beginning," she says. "It's only polite to make sure he's always there when we're seen."

I shake my head. "Most of my football plays aren't this complicated."

"Your football plays are over in ten seconds," she says.

We walk out into the lobby. Gerrard is signing for a cluster of people a third the size of the mob around Aston, whose handsome smile flashes in all directions as he signs for fans of all ages. I flash back to college, when there'd always be girls waiting to chat me up after a game, but a year-plus removed from that, the memory is just a faint flicker.

Caroll and I are halfway across the lobby when I get a whiff of skunk. "Miski," a voice calls out behind me. The scent's naggingly familiar, the voice less so. Caroll and I both turn in the same moment.

There's a spotted skunk holding up a camera phone. "Smile," he says. A moment later, I hear the artificial click of a picture. I register the mean look on his muzzle, the savage grin, and a whole lot of things come crashing in on my big stupid head all at once.

My first reaction, admittedly, is not a good one. "Give me that!"

I swipe at it, but he's already walking fast through the crowd, weaving through fans. I try to follow him, shouldering people aside, with Caroll tugging on my shirt. "What's the big deal?" she says. "We want people to take pictures of us, remember?"

"Not that one," I say, realizing how stupid it must sound to her, but focusing all my mental energy on keeping sight of Brian's tufted black ears as they weave through the mass of other people. I can still smell him, but the scent isn't directional enough to help if I lose him. I shoulder my way through the crowd, Caroll trailing behind me. Thank goodness the



Firebirds aren't more popular. If there were more fans in the lobby, I'd have no chance. On the other hand, Brian doesn't have as much experience pushing through and around football players as I do.

He's about to escape out the front when I get close enough to grab his shoulder. He squeaks and turns, glaring defiantly, but his voice is high and tight. "Get off! I'll scream, I will."

Caroll's caught up. "Dev," she says, "what is going on?"

"Why don't you tell her?" Brian seizes on Caroll's appearance to distract me. "Tell her all about your so-called boyfriend, huh? Oh, right. You didn't tell him about her, either!"

I let him go. My first instinct is to draw back my arm with a fist at the end of it, but fortunately my better judgment catches it at the same time Caroll does. Brian regains some confidence. "Oh, you just try that," he says, his voice still betraying his underlying fear. "Just try that. What a story that'd be."

We stand and stare at each other. Then, to save some face, I growl, "Get out of here, and don't do anything with that picture."

He smirks, turns, and leaves. I watch him go and then get out my own phone. Caroll looks after Brian and then at my phone, which is already up to my ear. "Ooooooooookay," she says. "I know it's none of my business, but at least tell me whether I should be on the phone to my flea asking for a better way to get in the papers."

I sigh. She doesn't seem to be freaking out. "No, you're fine. It's just this guy who has a thing against me. I need to get home, okay?"

She nods. "I'll be in touch," she says. It doesn't occur to me until later to wonder whether she means it. I'm already dialing.

Of course, I get his voicemail. He's traveling all day. "Hi," I say before the tone has even finished sounding. "It's me. Listen, ignore anything you get from Brian. I'll talk to you tomorrow about it when I pick you up. Love you." And then I feel I should say more, but I can't think of anything, so I just hold the phone in my paw, and eventually bring my thumb down on the End button.

I think about him all the way back, wanting to strangle Brian and myself depending on how my mood swings. Back at my loft, I try again, and this time he picks up.

"How were your flights?" I ask.

"Ugh," he says. "Crying cubs on two of the three legs. Middle seat on

the third. But on the bright side, I get to do it again tomorrow."

"But I'll be waiting to pick you up."

"That helps. So who's the panther in the pic Brian sent me?"

"Shit. That prick..." Rage tightens my paw into a fist again.

"I got your voicemail, hon. I'm not mad. Who is she?"

I breathe out. "She's the starlet my flea set me up with."

"Your what?"

"Ogleby. Sorry. It's publicity for both our careers, that's all."

He's quiet. I can hear him moving around, unpacking maybe. "So you took her to the dinner," he says finally.

"Yeah."

I hear more noises: clothes, dresser drawers, wire hangers. "Okay."

"Okay? Just that, okay?"

"I dunno, stud. You want me to get mad? I'm a little tired for that right now. You say it's just for show, fine, it's just for show. If you want to talk about it s'more, we can talk tomorrow, okay?"

"No, okay, that's fine." I say. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before."

"Me too," he says.

I have to be happy with that, until I actually see him at the airport the next day. The ride back to my apartment is quiet, and not the nice, comfortable kind of quiet. It's not a mad kind of quiet, either; I know those. No, this is a "Lee is thinking about things" kind of quiet, which makes me nervous, because I know he's thinking about Carroll, but I don't know what part of the whole Carroll thing he's thinking about.

At first, the quiet isn't that big a deal, and it's not like he's shutting me out. If I talk, he answers, and he seems to be in a good mood, if a bit distant. I think he'll cheer up when he sees the place, and his ears do perk up a little. "Whoever picked this couch for you should be shot," he says.

I laugh, and take him to the dining room, where the bottle of wine I bought for him is sitting next to two glasses. He doesn't react to what I thought was his favorite chardonnay, except to say, "not champagne?"

"Why champagne?"

"To celebrate your new place." He turns the bottle over.

I hadn't even thought of that. "I thought you liked that one," I say.

"I do." He smiles at me, puts the bottle down, and walks over to hug me. "Thanks."

"The food should be here any minute," I say. "Want to open that?"

We do, and it's actually closer to half an hour later that the food shows up. I'd thought, or hoped, that the wine would help matters, but Lee is still withdrawn, still quiet, staring out the window when the conversation falters, which it does a lot because I'm not that good at it when he's not really working to keep it going.

He perks up again when the food shows up, both of us starving, and it's a real gourmet meal from the steak house over on Fourth: filet mignon, potatoes au gratin, crisp veggies still steaming, a half-loaf of warm bread, even their own creamy butter. He asks how I got Murray's to deliver, and I tell him that when you're a Firebirds backup, you can get all kinds of special perks. He wants to know what the starters get, and I tell him when I start, they'll send a waiter over.

When he laughs, for a few minutes, everything is just about as right as it's ever been. We curl up on the couch and watch a movie, but it's not that good a movie, and I see his eyes trailing out to the window and the neon glow of downtown.

After the movie, I ask him about his weekend. "It wasn't a bad game," he says. "Titus was down eleven with three minutes to play. They've got this freshman wolf QB, Higgins, who scores on a run, and then Cansino College fumbles on their first play after that and Titus gets the ball back. Higgins launches the ball, I kid you not, sixty yards, drops it right into the arms of their best wideout—fox—who, wait for it... drops it."

"Agh." I clutch my head.

He smiles. "Gets better. Next play, same exact play. Wideout under-runs his route, Cansino's cornerback makes the interception."

"You're kidding."

He holds up a paw. "He doesn't drop to the ground. He tries to run it back." He shakes his head. "You believe that? Three-point lead, a minute to go, and he tries to run it back. So of course, the fox finally redeems himself. Catches the corner from behind, pops the ball out and falls on it. Titus gets it back, forty-five seconds to go."

"He tried to run it back?" My cornerback training seems ages away now, but I remember that clear as day: interception at the end of a game, with the lead, equals "fall on the ball."

"With a lead. Anyway, they line up, Higgins fires to the end zone, misses. Second down, he throws short, and the runner doesn't get to the end zone. Clock running. Twelve seconds. Another throw to the end zone,

missed. Fourth down and two, Higgins scrambles, gets the first down. Clock stops to move the chains, and as soon as they get set, Higgins spikes the ball. Two seconds to go. Last play of the game, about twelve yards from the end zone. Down four. They show pass, Higgins drops back, and runs straight up the middle. Touchdown."

"Wow." I rub his ears and grin. "So nice of your job to send you around to see good games."

"That's the first good one this year." He closes his eyes and leans into my rubbing. "Mostly they're 48-7 blowouts. It's actually not good when it's a good game, because then I get wrapped up in the game and end up not watching the players. And watching the film afterwards, it's not nearly as effective. You don't catch the feel of the game, the confidence that this Higgins kid radiates, how his guys all believe he'll pull it out for them." He trails a paw over my leg lazily. "If he had any kind of good support, he'd be on a lot more scouts' radar."

"Anyone else good in the game?"

He sighs. "Cansino's left tackle isn't bad. Borderline pro material." His muzzle twists around to look into mine. "How was your dinner?"

"Not as good as it would've been with you," I say.

"Anybody do anything embarrassing?"

I slide my paw under his shirt while I think about that. "No more than usual."

I'm not sure whether I'm just paranoid or if he really does take more coaxing than usual to get into the bedroom. What I am sure about is that once we're in there, and things are going the way things always go, well, they don't quite go the way they always go. I mean, we're both ready, don't get me wrong about that. But he's on his stomach, and I'm under his tail, and he's just lying there. Usually even in this position he's moving around, thrusting back against me, really getting into it. All I can feel is the tension in his back, and every so often a motion back from his hips, as though he's remembered I'm back here. His tail flicks against me, but doesn't wrap around me.

I slide my arms around him, holding him as my shaft slides back and forth in his warmth, trying to recapture the feeling of oneness that makes our times together so good. He's slim but powerful, strong for his size, but I've always loved holding that body and knowing so well all the things that go on in his head, his spirit, his heart. He responds, puts a paw over mine,

but that doesn't help the feeling that there are things he's not sharing with me. I worry about that until it's not really possible for me to worry about anything any more, and then I reach down to make sure he's not worrying either.

It ends in the usual way, with both of us panting and sticky, but something's missing, something's a little off. I won't say it was bad, but it wasn't as good as it could have been. I don't want to say anything because I know half the time when I talk I just make things worse. But he doesn't say anything either, just falls asleep against me with one arm over my chest.

I wish I could fall asleep. It would help if this were a familiar place. Even though it's my bed, my posters, my fox, the window reminds me that outside is a landscape I've only lived in for a few weeks. My fox, too, is strange, and I start to wonder if things are changing all over.

It takes me an hour to get to sleep. When I wake up, I remember dreams of vague, disconnected shifting landscapes in which I was some kind of secret agent, but the villain I was fighting turned into the building I was chasing him through, and then into a star in the sky. I had a little computer that helped me keep track of what he was, but somehow it kept getting one step behind him. Then it insisted he was me, and I had to reboot it. That's when I woke up.

Lee's a little more animated in the morning, if not by much. We grab breakfast down at Chip's Java, around the corner, and sit quietly at a table, him with his latte and me with my black coffee. He gets a chocolate muffin, I get a bearclaw and a bagel, and we sit and eat without much conversation. He smiles at me a couple times, but not much else.

So when we get back to my place and he starts to pack up, I realize I can't just let him go like this. "Hey," I say, "you're pretty quiet for a fox. What's going on? The thing with Carroll bothering you?"

"Nah," he says, and keeps packing his bag. "I told you, it's cool."

"What is it, then?"

He stops and looks around. "Well, this is a really nice place."

"Thanks," I say. "If it makes you feel better, I didn't pick out most of the decorations."

"I know." He fingers the bed. "You need new sheets. No, I mean, I guess I always thought of this as temporary, that you'd come back to Hilltown. This feels permanent, is all."

"I'll still come back in the off-season. I can afford to have two places

now, y'know."

"I know, I know." He smiles, slings his bag over his shoulder, and stands on tiptoe to kiss my nose. "It's just stuff I need to work out." His cell phone goes off just then. He checks the number and ignores it, then looks at the time. "We should get to the airport."

Usually when something like that bothers him, he snaps at me and tells me to leave him the fuck alone. This quietness worries the hell out of me. And I can't shake the feeling that he is, if not lying, at least not telling me the whole truth.

I can't help it; I nudge at him a couple more times on the way to the airport, but he changes the subject each time. I give up and let him off with our public version of a kiss: a one-armed hug and brushing my muzzle across his ear. I watch him walk through the security gate. From the other side, he turns and raises a paw. I smile, wave back, and then he's gone.

Back in the world of football, with the regular season around the corner, things heat up. Playbooks and practices, drills and getting drilled. I can't get Lee and his problems off my mind, so my first practice is a disaster. Once we get past the really basic footwork, I screw up all over the field. I'm supposed to run a 57 Baked Alaska, and I mix it up with the 39 Crepes Suzette, and I end up banging into Colin, running a short route to cover the slot. "Watch where you're going," he says.

"Watch yourself, rook," I snap, turning my back on him.

"Back in the game," Steez says to me.

He hates "I'm sorry," so I just nod and jog back to the start. But even as he's barking out plays and instructions, I'm remembering how Lee looked in the car, and feeling guilty about Carroll. I realize I've completely missed what was called, so I try to figure it out from where everyone else is lined up and what they're doing. I guess wrong.

This time, Steez gets up in my face. "Head! In! The! Game!" he yells.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Don't give me sorry! Give me game!"

I jog back to the line and focus my full attention on him.

The third time I screw up, he sends me to the figurative showers. "You come back this afternoon, head on straight," he yells. "Go take five, take nap, take hangover cure. Whatever." Then he comes up close to me. "Starters," he says, tapping his head, "have head in game always."

So I sit in the empty locker room next to my locker and I put my head

back against it and I feel myself getting angry. God damn Lee for his secretive moping. I need to get this starting position, and instead I'm standing out on the field worrying about him. He's smart, he knew I would. That's why he told me not to.

Well, fine. He doesn't want me to worry about him, I'm not going to. I've been doing well with Gerrard and Carson, and Killer keeps screwing up. I have a chance to start if I can keep my head in the game. This practice might've set me back for another week or two, and that gets me good and worked up. If Lee would just talk to me, I wouldn't be this upset.

I start pacing the locker room. Forget him, I tell myself. Get back in the game. Go through the playbook. That works. I start reciting the plays to myself, doing footwork on the concrete of the locker room floor. A couple of the guys come in and look at me like I'm crazy. I ignore them, too. Shut out the world and focus on what needs to be done.

That afternoon, I am so ready. We go out for drills and I'm itching to get to the scrimmage, second team versus second team in a simulated game. Football is all that's on my mind. I run every route. I bark at Dix when he misses a step. I watch a play develop and abandon my pattern to break it up. I get hot and sweaty and I don't think about Lee once the whole afternoon. At the end of practice, Steez gets my attention across the sideline. He taps his head and nods. I nod back and run to the showers, for real this time.

That night, I go out with Charm, though I convince him not to go to a strip joint. We go to Mick's and get pretty trashed. I walk home after calling him a cab, and lie down on my bed. The smell of fox gets me worked up again, angry at him for his attitude, for not calling me today, for the uninspired sex, for not getting angry about Carroll. I'm not drunk enough to throw up, but I am drunk enough to call him.

This, of course, is not a good idea. I get his voicemail, because it's an hour later where he is and he's probably sleeping. But I start with, "So you don't pick up the phone when I call," and go on to tell him that I don't want him to talk to me, that he can solve his own damn problems, and that if he doesn't want to talk to me that I don't want to talk to him. I don't remember hanging up, but I must have at some point, because the phone is off when I wake up.

I'm on my way to the stadium when the phone rings, and it's only then that I remember calling the night before. Ah, jeez. I hold the phone without

looking at it, afraid to see Lee's name on the caller ID. But I can't not answer it, so I pick it up and thank God, it's Ogleby.

"What?" I snap.

"It's working!" he chirps gleefully. "Listen: At the Firebirds' team dinner last night..."

"It wasn't last night," I cut in.

"This is from yesterday. Listen: At the Firebirds' team dinner last night, there might have been the stirrings of romance in the air as backup cornerback-turned-backup-linebacker Devlin Miski was spotted with gorgeous starlet—gorgeous, did you hear that—Caroll Chavon, of "Panther House." Miski, a second-year tiger, looked especially good alongside Chavon. This could be serious, as Miski has never been spotted dating a woman before."

Something about that is making my whiskers tingle. "Where did that come from?"

"Did you hear that? 'Looked especially good. ' You gotta keep seeing her, kid. It's doing wonders."

"Was that the pronghorn guy, whatsisname?"

"The photo doesn't look half bad too, it's from a cell phone, but still, you should dress up more often. I never seen that tux on you before. Did she pick it out?"

"Ogleby, where are you reading that from?"

"It's some blog online, but don't worry, blogs are as good as the major media these days, that's what I hear."

"Whose blog?"

"What does it matter? Listen, kid, I'm gonna call Caroll's agent and show her this and set up some more places for you to be seen. Love ya."

"Ogleby!" I almost drive through a red light. He's already gone.

For the rest of the drive, I hold the phone like a raw egg, waiting for Lee to get my message and call. I want to call him, to ask him to look up this blog, but of course I can't do that, can't just follow up a drunken rant with a favor to ask. When I get to the stadium, I throw the phone in my locker and leave it there, take nothing but football out onto the field with me, and have a great practice.

That afternoon we're free to work in the weight room. Here, I can let all the anger and worries about Lee come flooding back. I might've really done it this time, I realize. He was trying to work through problems and

didn't want to bother me with them, and I called up and shouted at him, drunk. Not like he hasn't done his share of stupid things while drunk, but at least in his case he was trying to blow me, which isn't something I can hold against him. So I punish myself in the weight room, stack on the plates and strain until my muscles are screaming at me that whatever I did, they still need to haul my sorry ass around and could I lay off just a bit? I let the barbell clatter back onto the rack and lie there breathing hard.

"Good workout," I hear Fisher say.

I grunt a reply. All my anger at Lee gets shifted to him almost immediately. If I had time to think about it, I'd think it was weird how that happened. I have enough self-control to not start something in the middle of the weight room with who knows who else around and in earshot, but I don't want to push my luck. I just hope my disinterested reply is enough to get him to go the hell away.

"Last time I pushed myself like that was before I met Gena," he goes on. "Got dumped by a cute little tigress. Can't even remember her name."

"Dixie." I get up and walk away from him, toward the dumbbells.

He follows me. "Oh yeah. I guess what I'm sayin' is, I get how you're feelin', but you made the right choice."

It's the unfortunate timing of that remark, coming when I'm able to spin around and see that there's nobody else in the weight room, that spurs me to finally reply. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He blinks. Facing me now, he puts his paws up. "Easy," he says. "I just figured you told your friend... I figure you ended it, or somethin'. I might be wrong, but I never seen you as worked up as you been this week. Between moonin' in the first practice and goin' lights-out since then, that's the way I figure."

"Is that the way you figure?" I say.

Now he narrows his eyes. I see his shoulders bunch up and tense. He's shorter than me, but more muscular, and in our sleeveless tops, the difference is obvious. For all that matters. "Don't go off on me, rook." A snarl creeps into his voice. "I ain't gonna take the fall for your fucked-up state of mind."

"Fucked up?" I get up in his face and shove him in the chest. "That's what you think of me?"

He staggers back, recovers fast, and shoves me right back, harder. "You weren't nothin' like this last year."

"Maybe I'm just getting tired of hiding it. Like Tony whatisname." I reach out to shove him again. He grabs my wrist. I twist it away and try again, more like a punch than a shove this time. He only partially deflects it.

"What?" I can't tell if he's startled at my comment or at the deflected punch. He doesn't return the shove this time, but he doesn't have to. I'm fired up enough.

"You know, just take your fucking holier-than-thou attitude and fuck off." I want him to throw a punch at this point, so I can stop holding back.

He growls. "Fucked if you catch me bein' understanding again." He turns and stalks away.

Standing watching him, my fists clench. All the anger that's been simmering in me for the last day boils up, and he's still in the room, a convenient target. I stride toward him and grab his shoulder, spinning him around. "Understanding?" I yell.

He's got football reflexes. He shoves me while I'm still yelling. "Fuck your understanding!" I push him into a weight bench, where he staggers and nearly falls. I run at him again, but he's ready with a quick punch to the gut, which hurts even though I partially block it. He throws me sideways into the wall, and I come right back at him, landing one on his jaw and another in his upper chest.

He closes and we grapple, where he has the advantage because of his heavier frame and lower center of gravity. But I hold my own, which I think later is because he's holding back and I'm not. We both get slammed into the wall a couple times, then he trips against a weight bench and I throw him to the floor.

My heart pounds as I stare down, panting. He stares back up, his tail lashing in time with mine. I want to say something devastating, something to hurt him in a way that our fight didn't, but I can't think of anything. What's more, he doesn't look angry at me any more, just kind of stunned, and now I feel worse because I let out all this anger and it isn't helping anything. So I stalk out of the room, slamming my fist against one of the lockers in the hall outside as I pass it.

Logic filters slowly back into my head as I shower. There are lots of penalties for fighting with a teammate, up to suspension for a game. Water trickles between my ears and down the bridge of my nose. Fisher wouldn't hesitate to have me suspended. Well, maybe he'd hesitate. Hopefully. But

I'm not banking on it. And I'm not sure I don't deserve a suspension, the way I'm feeling and the way I just acted. At the very least, I think he'll report it and recommend a fine or something. Which is okay. Fines are a joke among the team. Twenty grand, thirty grand? Oh, man, I can't buy that second car now. Even for someone like me, making league minimum, twenty grand would hurt but not a lot.

The one thing I resolve not to do is apologize. He deserved to get knocked around, and I'll take the penalty for it. That, of course, reminds me of the thing I do need to apologize for. I figure it's probably time I give Lee a call. The silence from him has been, what's the word? Ominous?

When I take out the phone, I see I've missed a couple calls during practice and weight training, both from my parents. A little worried, I call back right away and get my mom on the line. I ask her what's going on, and she says she was just going to ask me that, because they got this voicemail from me...

I have one of those moments when my fur feels like it's going to crawl right off me. Of course the speed dial for Lee is right next to the one for home, and of course I didn't listen very closely to the voicemail before I started talking, did I? Mom wants to know who I was talking to, because I haven't really mentioned Lee around them at all, only once or twice hinted that I was seeing someone. I say something vaguely about blowing things out of proportion, but she keeps at me with the questions: Who won't talk to me? Who did I used to trust? What did they do? Why did I say my bed smelted like them? Hookers, Mom, I say, which she doesn't believe, but she finally gets tired of asking. Then I get questions about when I'm going to be in the starting lineup, which isn't any easier. I'm finally rescued by the call waiting beep of my phone.

"That's her, Mom, I gotta go," I say. She says to call her if I'm having girl trouble. I finally get a good-bye out of her and switch lines with a breathless "hi."

"Hey, kid, great news, I got hold of Carroll's agent and you're on for Saturday night. Saturday's okay, right?"

"What?" It takes me a second to register the squeaky ferret voice.

"Saturday night, you're not doing anything, right?"

Jesus. "Yeah, I guess... I mean..." I look around the locker room. A couple of the guys are in, joking around. "I need to check."

"You need to check? What do you need to check, this is a no-brainer,

you guys are getting along, you're getting good press..."

"I need to check, okay? Talk to you later."

I race home and flop down on the bed, now armed with a legitimate excuse to call Lee beyond apologizing for the drunken voicemail he never heard. I try to calm the flood of emotions in my head before I do. Fortunately, Ogleby has distracted me with a problem to be tackled, and the rest of it is all busy wondering what Fisher's going to do about our fight. But there's nothing I can do about that, and I do have to call Lee, so I take a breath and dial his number.

"Hi," he says, answering on the first ring.

Just hearing his voice again gives me a wave of relief. A small one, but enough that I retract my claws from the sheet and feel the tension unwind from my shoulders and tail. "You feeling any better?"

"Somewhat. How about you?"

It takes me a little while to sort through the emotions of the last twenty-four hours. "Uh, fine. Hey, I guess Brian posted that picture of me."

"You saw that?"

"Not yet. Ogleby did. He loved it."

"What did you think?" He's quiet, reserved in asking that question.

"Sounded like there was more to the post than Ogleby was seeing."

"Mm. He's a good writer when he puts his mind to it."

"Can you send me the link so I can see it?"

"There's not much... yeah, sure, I'll do it." I hear the beep of a laptop and typing sounds.

"What's your schedule for this weekend?" I ask.

More typing. "I'm actually gonna be kind of busy."

I wait for him to tell me with what, but it's probably just more football games. Still, it takes me a second to remember to do the right thing. "Ogleby wants me to go out with Caroll again."

"I figured it wasn't a one-time thing."

"So it's okay?"

"Sure, I told you that." He adds, after a pause and with less sharpness, "Thanks for letting me know."

It's almost like there's nothing wrong. I let my tail hang over the side of the bed and put one paw behind my head. "So the weekend after? We've got New Kestle coming in, should be a good game."

"Um... I'm going out to Freestone and Port that weekend."

Something's crept into his voice. My tail curls back up onto the bed.
"The whole weekend?"

"It's a long trip."

"Fox?"

He sighs. "Look, I was thinking... you might need to focus on football 'til you win the starring job."

"Of course I do," I say. "So?"

"Soooo... I think I'm a distraction."

I snort. "You're just realizing that now?"

"I just mean that you need to have all your focus."

"So I can only focus on one thing at a time?"

"Dev..."

I'm snagging the sheets with a claw. I retract it. "Sorry. So you don't want to see me again until I'm a starter?"

"That's not what I said."

"That's what I heard."

The sharp edge creeps back into his voice. "Then listen again. I just said I don't think we should see each other until you crack the starting lineup."

I stare across the room, out the window, and watch the lights on the office buildings downtown. I wonder if anyone in there is looking through their window at me. "You've seen Killer play, right?"

"Let me spell this out for you, stud. I have so much confidence in you that I know this isn't going to be a long time off."

"So, what then? You think I just need some extra motivation?"

"I don't really want to do this either." He sounds pained, or annoyed. Or both.

I squeeze my eyes shut and open them again to look at the light patterns. They are fixed, unmoving. I go to the window just to see the people on the street below. "Then if you don't want to do this, and I don't want to do it..."

"I know how hard it is to learn a new position. And I know what kind of opportunity you have there, and how important it is."

"Jesus, Lee, why do we have to do this over the phone?" I put a paw against the glass. My reflection looks exhausted.

He chuckles, dryly. "Give yourself a minute. You'll figure it out."

"You know what I mean." I do realize what I've said after that. I look

at the tiger in the glass and smile. Before he has a chance to reply, I keep going. "You really think so?"

"I'll see you within a month, I bet."

I think about a month of nothing but my own paw. I think of Charm and his strip clubs. I can see flashing neon a couple streets over: a club that he says he went to, once. "You bet?"

"Sure."

"All right, then." Several people turn down the street with the neon. I wonder how many of them are going to the club. "How about this for a bet? You can't jerk off 'til you see me again."

That gets a startled laugh out of him. "Seriously?"

"Yeah," I say. "You really have confidence in me? Prove it."

"All right," he says, "but you have to play, too."

I look out at my reflection. "No jerking off?"

"No coming of any kind, by any means."

"For either of us."

He sounds more relaxed than at any other point during the call as he says, "Deal. And Dev?"

"Hm?"

"That includes Caroll."

I laugh. "I'll be sure to tell her. Can we still talk on the phone? You and me, I mean."

He returns my laugh and says the next thing in his Lauren Bacollie voice. "Just try and stop me, handsome."

So I go back to the bed and tell him about the message I left for my parents. "I was drunk," I say, "and you were acting weird. Thank goodness my mom got it first."

"Yeah. Sorry," he said. "The shock of seeing your apartment. I didn't expect it to hit me like that."

"I thought it was the dinner. Hey, had you seen Brian's post about it?"

He hesitates. "No. I would've told you."

Of course he would have. So why do I feel a weird twinge, an urge to press him further? "I should have pointed my mom to it," I say. "I told her I'm dating a hooker, but she didn't buy that."

He laughs. "How long before she asked when you were going to be starting?"

"Oh, that's second on the list. After girlfriends for her, and after the

auto shop for my dad."

"Well," he says, "you'll have an answer for them pretty soon."

"I'd better," I say, "or my balls will explode."

I call Ogleby back after that and tell him that Saturday night is free. I'm feeling good, lying back in bed again, about ready to go out on the town for a nice dinner. Or at least, you know, Mick's fried chicken and cheese fries. And then, in the middle of the conversation, Ogleby squeaks out, "Great, oh, and I'll let you know about the timing on the engagement."

"Okay," I say. "Wait, what?"

"Oh, her agent and mine got to talking and her agent said there's nothing to generate press like an engagement, so we were thinking that when there's been a little more exposure and a little more press out there, it'd be a real plus for you guys to announce an engagement. Then you could spend a few months planning the wedding and being seen together and then maybe with other people, and then the engagement gets broken off, unless you really do like each other in which case there's a wedding before you split up. Or maybe we can do the wedding anyway, I dunno, if you're more traditional we don't have to do that."

"Ogleby, what the fuck...?"

"Okay, so you're more traditional, no problem, just the engagement, then. Tell your parents beforehand so they don't freak out. Listen, it's cool, I'll handle all the press writing. You don't have to do anything except go on dates, and you're cool with that, right? So listen, Saturday you're going to Pinchot's, you know where that is?"

"Jesus, we're in Crystal City next weekend and I can't go out the night before a game and I can't get engaged!"

"You just said you could go Saturday night. Pinchot's is one of the best restaurants in Crystal City and Carroll lives there and I told you not to worry about the engagement, I'll handle all of it. Come on, kid, nobody takes engagements seriously these days."

"I can't get engaged. I'll do Saturday night, but I can't get engaged, so just —"

"I hear you, kid, but look, no offense, you need to focus on football and let me handle your personal life, okay? You want to be making rookie pay the rest of your career or you want some endorsement packages?"

I sit up in bed and shout into the phone. "No engagement. Listen to me. No engagement."

"We'll talk about it," he says. "Go settle your midwestern tail and have fun Saturday night." And then he hangs up on me.

I know I ought to call Lee back, but we ended the last conversation on such a nice note that I don't want to ruin it. So I just go down to Mick's, order a plate of grease, and call Carroll. It's an hour earlier in Crystal City, she'll be up.

"Engagement?" she says. "Sure, makes sense."

"I can't do it," I tell her, spooning congealed cheese off the plate with the last of the fries.

"Why not?"

Because I just made up with my boyfriend who's worried that me moving into a loft is pulling me away from him, and if he was worried about *that*... "I just can't."

Between the noise where she is and the noise of Mick's, I can barely hear her. "Okay, I'm sort of at a thing here. We're going out Saturday, right? Let's talk about it then."

"All right." I hang up and sit at Mick's drinking beers for another hour until curfew. The coaches sometimes call to make sure we're home, and I need to be rested anyway. Lee and Ogleby are right. I need to focus on football.

The next day, I show up apprehensive, waiting for Coach to tell me I'm suspended or fined or both. I wait through morning practice, and nothing happens. Steez doesn't come over to me at lunch. Afternoon practice with the whole defense goes without a hitch, a fine, or a suspension. Coach's post-practice speech ends without him asking me to stay behind. In the locker room, I finally catch Fisher's eye.

He gives me a surprising look, a little guilty and a little angry, not what I'd expected from him. I try to corner him afterwards, but he puts me off, saying he'll talk to me later and then disappearing. I've got his cell phone number, but I'm not about to chase him. Instead, I call Lee and tell him about the fight. "Leave it," he says. "If he wants to talk to you, he'll find you."

It's good advice, but I keep trying to corner Fisher anyway. He dodges me during the all-defense practices, and disappears at the end of the day before I finish dressing. Friday, he gets on the plane to Crystal City late, sitting at the other end from where I am, and everyone's so jazzed about our first game that I barely notice. The practice Friday afternoon at the

stadium is by group, so I don't see him then; the one Saturday morning is all-defense but he skips it with some kind of minor injury, and Saturday afternoon and evening we're supposed to study film, which doesn't lend itself to conversation. The evening film session is optional, and of course, I have other plans.

Pinchot's is one of those places that makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong, only nobody will tell me what. The pangolin in the tux who greets us gives a little sniff when I don't give him my coat. The grey fox who takes our order takes the menus back fast, with a flip, the way I'd grab a football away from a rookie who was holding it wrong. I don't say anything to Carroll, because I don't want to sound like a rookie myself, but it makes me self-conscious, hunching slightly over the table.

I order chardonnay out of habit, and because I don't really know anything else. We're into the appetizer, or rather, I'm into the appetizer and she's watching me eat a skewered shrimp, when she brings up the engagement. "Why does it bother you?"

She's got on a formal red dress, which looked strapless until she sat down and I saw the thin lines through parts in her fur. It accentuates her chest, not that it needed it, and she's run a few matching red highlights through her head fur. There's also a pretty orange pendant she's wearing, part of a set with her earrings. I spent the first few minutes of the meal just staring at her, wondering how she manages to look so good and make it seem so effortless. Lee can do that too. I don't know anyone on the team who can. Aston, maybe.

"I don't know." I turn my fork over and over in my paw. "It's a lie. I don't want to do that."

Carroll smiles. "That's sweet, really it is, but you do understand that you're lying all the time, right? To your friends, your family, your teammates. When you don't tell the truth, that's a lie. Going out with me is a lie. Yes, it's okay, I'm lying too."

"But it's..." I try to come up with the right words. "It's a big public lie."

She shrugs. "When you're a public figure, your whole 'image' is a lie."

I stab the last shrimp and swipe it through the cocktail sauce. "Can you believe this is a twenty-dollar appetizer?" I say. "There were, what, five shrimp?"

"Six, I think." She grins. "But they came in a cut crystal goblet."

I slide my finger along its edge. "And look at the tablecloth, and they

gave me a special fork just to eat the shrimp with. I don't need a special fork. I have claws."

"Some people want the special fork," she says, picking it up and looking at her reflection in its shiny-clean surface. "They want the tablecloth and the snooty waiter and the expensive-looking paintings on the walls and all of it."

The chardonnay, I have to admit, is good. Better than the first time I had it, at that dinner out with Lee the night Brian came to my apartment to try to scare me off, or something, and that was the best chardonnay I'd had until tonight. I'll have to take Lee here, I think. He'd enjoy it.

"You're seeing someone else, aren't you? Someone for real."

I jerk back to meet her eyes. "Wha—I mean, I..."

She laughs. "Calm down. I know that look. It's sweet, really. So what, someone your agent doesn't feel is appropriate for you? Not a cat, or doesn't know how to behave in public? Something like that?"

"Um. Something like that." I fiddle with my silverware, looking down.

"My mother loves the fact that I'm dating a football player," she says. "I haven't had the heart to tell her it's fake. I think she knows, on one level, but she doesn't expect it to work out with any of my boyfriends anymore, so I'll just let it go until we officially break it off."

"I hope we can still be friends," I say as lightly as I can manage.

Her eyes sparkle in the light of the chandelier. "I don't imagine that'll be a problem. You've already got my personal cell phone number."

"You have more than one cell phone?"

"I have a business line, which is what I give out to most people. That was the first number I gave you. Remember when I gave you the other number, after the dinner?"

I feel like an idiot. "I thought... jeez, I thought you'd just changed phone numbers."

Her laughter makes the leopard at the next table turn and gawk at her. When he turns back, his wife (or girlfriend) gives him a nasty glare. Carroll sees the look and whispers, as we turn our attention back to each other, "Someone's not gettin' any tonight."

"I dunno," I say. "If he just apologizes..."

She chuckles. "My next to last boyfriend used to look at other femmes constantly. I made him buy me a rose for every time he looked at someone else. I had a bedroom full before too long."

"Was that the cokehead or the cheater? Wait, I think I can guess."

"No, that was the trophy hunter. He dumped me when he saw a chance to trade up to Tawny Blackfoot."

"It's natural for guys to look, though. A rose every time?"

She sips her own glass of wine, which I think is a ros  or something. It's pink, at any rate. "It was a game. After the first rime, he used to look at another femme every rime he wanted to give me a rose. He could afford it. Daddy was a studio exec."

"Is that why you were dating him?" I regret the question as soon as I ask it; it sounds mean. But she just shrugs.

"Of course. He was a nice guy, too. That makes a difference."

"I'd hope so."

The main course arrives, her halibut and spaghetti (it was called something fancier on the menu) and my lobster and steak (she grimaced when I called it "surf'n'turf"). It might not be worth fifty bucks, but I gotta admit, it's damn good.

I order a chocolate cake for dessert, and it's this tiny round thing smaller than my paw, so I order another one.

"We don't have to do it if you're really not comfortable with it," she says while we're waiting.

I look at her and think through it. Admittedly, it'd make things a little easier with the team, wouldn't it? And I really don't think Lee would mind. But each time I get close to that place, thinking about announcing my intention to marry the beautiful panther across the table from me, something goes cold at the back of my neck, and I get that feeling like when I look across the field and see the ball flying to an open receiver. "I don't know why, but it bothers me." I keep my voice down. "I feel like a total tool. I know you're right, I know this goes on all the time, but... but it was always *them* doing it. Not me."

"Them?" She flicks an ear. "You mean us?"

The second chocolate cake arrives then, and I dig in because I don't know whether she's including me in that "us" or not, and I don't want to answer one way or the other. "You going to talk to your real S.O. about it?" she asks as I finish off the cake, adding, "No thanks" to the last bite I offer her.

"I've been putting it off," I say. "I thought I could get out of it, and then I wouldn't have to even bring it up."

"And you'd never say anything about it at all?"

"Sure," I say, "but then it would be in a "can you believe what they wanted me to do?" story." I run my finger down the dessert menu without seeing it.

"And you could say how you stood up and said This Will Not Stand, right?"

I grin. "Something like that."

"And then what would she say?"

The question catches me off guard. I stare up at the painting above Carroll's head, some kind of fuzzy abstract of fruit, and imagine how the conversation would go. "I think," I say slowly, "I think, that it was very nice of me, but really she didn't mind, or wouldn't have minded, or something to that effect."

"It doesn't make it less valid that it's just for you," she says. "You want coffee?"

"Not for twenty bucks," I say. "Isn't there a Starbucks around here?"

She rolls her eyes, but takes me to a nice little shop called the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, which she prefers because it has lots better tea than Starbucks. The lattes are good, too, not that I can really tell the difference. Our pronghorn reporter doesn't follow us past the restaurant, so when we leave the coffee shop, we're on our own. Carroll seems a bit disappointed, but I like the solitude. By the time we part, I'm feeling better about the engagement. I feel like I can use a lot of her words to explain it to Lee, and it'll be okay. So I tell her I'll do it, and she promises to tell her agent so I don't have to talk to Ogleby.

I get back to the hotel early and spend some time making up details to tell Charm about Carroll's anatomy. We get to sleep early, because we need to be rested for Sunday and the first real game of the season.

Opening day isn't anything like my first game last year, but the vets say it's never the same as your rookie year. It's still pretty cool, though. We're going out onto the field and it's as beautiful as that first day on the practice field. The main difference is the noise and the smell. The stadium in Crystal City is full, sixty thousand people of all different species, a sea of blue and gold, a wave of scents all mixed together. The one thing practice can't prepare you for, even pre-season can't prepare you for, is playing this game in front of this crowd with the knowledge that it matters. This is where everything counts. You can't laugh off mistakes any more.

Everyone's playing their hardest, and nothing comes easy.

Crystal City won their division last year. They've got a few key players, a stud QB and two hot wideouts he likes to spread the field with. We don't match up great with them, but we hold our own 'til the second quarter, when they break it open with a long touchdown pass and another score set up by a long run. On the run, I see Killer miss a step and whiff on a tackle. Steez sees it too.

At the half, we're down 21-10. Coach Samuelson gives a halftime speech that boils down to "we're better than this." I sit near Gerrard and Carson, and watch Killer lounge against the locker a few feet away. Charm's the only other one who seems that relaxed, but he's always relaxed.

Lee calls me on the phone with precise timing, in the ten minutes between the end of coach's speech and when we have to get back out on the field. "Tell that cougar to keep his eye on his assignment," he snaps.

"I got nothing to do with that," I say.

"I know," he says. "Actually, don't tell him that. I'll be riding your big, hot shaft within a week, the way he's going."

Charm notices me adjusting my uniform on the way back out the field. "Crystal City has the best fuckin' cheerleaders in the league," he says, elbowing me. "Which one you checkin' out? The tigress? I got my eye on the vixen."

The game doesn't get much better for us in the third quarter. By the fourth, we're into garbage time, and I get to go out with the second unit and play most of the quarter. This is my first real-game experience at my new position, but I don't let it get to me. I think of Lee, I imagine him watching me on TV, and I make every tackle and drop their second-string RB for a loss once. By the end of the quarter, I like to think that the rest of the guys have caught my enthusiasm, mainly because I keep yelling at them, "Play with pride!" and Dix echoes me: "Don't let them down the field!"

Our defensive effort allows the offense to catch up by the end of the game so that the final score is only 35-24. Coach Samuelson gathers us in the locker room and tells us we fought hard, and that this is a good beginning to the season. We've got our home opener the next week against Kerina, a division game against the only team that was worse than we were last year. I get a quick chat with Lee, enough time for him to tell me I did great, before we have to get on the plane.

It's good to be home, even if we have to go to practice on Monday. We only get Monday off when we win, Coach says. So we're off the plane Sunday night, falling into bed to get up bright and early for our practice, and that's why it isn't until Monday night that I get an e-mail from Ogleby with a link to Brian's website.

It's one of six links Ogleby sent me, but I recognize the name and go over there first, before the ESPN article. Brian's posted something about me on it, not related to Carroll at all but to my performance in the game. "To those of us familiar with Miski's college career, his performance was no surprise," Brian's written. "He seemed to be everywhere, adapting to his new position with ease, as adaptable as we remember from his Forester days."

I try to go back and find what he wrote about me and Carroll, but I can't navigate the damn website, and eventually I give up and go on to the other articles. I ask Lee about it that night.

"Did you see this thing ESPN wrote?"

"You got half a paragraph there. The guys at High and Bright did a whole paragraph."

"Brian wrote nearly a whole article."

I hear the click of his jaw snapping shut. "Yeah," he says, drawing the word out. "Look, Dev, this isn't a really good time..."

"I mean, it was actually pretty nice. What do you think's got into him? I thought he hated me."

"I should really get going," Lee says. "Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Um, sure." I glance at the clock. It's only ten, eleven where he is. "Where you off to?"

"I'm just tired."

I frown. "Everything okay?"

He answers quickly. "Fine, hon. Just, I gotta file my reports tomorrow and Morty moved the meeting up to eight."

"All right," I say slowly. In the background silence, I can hear the muffled drone of an airplane.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow night. Love you," he says.

"Love you too." I hang up and walk over to my window. To my right, I hear a rumble and look over into the sky in time to see the lights of a jet landing at Chevali International.

Come to think of it, Lee's place in Hilltown isn't that near an airport

not that I remember. And past eleven is a pretty late hour for a plane to be landing over a residential area. For a couple of our flights last year, when I flew out with the Dragons, we had to stay over in a hotel on the road because our flight couldn't land later than eleven at night.

But he couldn't be... could he?

I flip the phone open and hold my finger over the button. I don't want to just call and ask where he is; I've got nothing except a feeling to base it on. I wish I had something else, some other good reason to call him. Because I hate all the suspicions in my head, and it's worse because I don't even know what I suspect him of. He's always kept to himself, but never given me any reason to doubt him.

My claw strokes the button. If I don't call him, I won't be able to sleep, now. If I do call him, I can't take it back. I look up at the window and the reflection in it. You're an idiot, I tell the tiger standing there. He might be traveling for work, or visiting family. Though he would have told me in that case, wouldn't he? And it wouldn't be so suspicious if we hadn't just had that whole conversation about not seeing each other, which almost made sense, almost seemed logical. Now, watching the lights of the plane make their way into the distance, it seems odd. Why is he suddenly so worried about me learning the new position now? Why not a month ago?

The glass is cold to my paw. I stare out at the city in the night. There are places out there I never notice during the day. Not that I'm at home during the day much. I watch the neon, the people walking around under the streetlights, and all the while my claw is scraping back and forth over the Talk button. Just a little pressure, that's all it would take.

But it's probably nothing. And then he'd feel annoyed and I'd feel like an idiot, and a heel for doubting him. I don't want to have that feeling, not with how good I felt after my performance in the game. Even though we lost, I feel proud of the effort I put in. I rub my thumb over the Talk button. I feel ashamed of the impulse to call, not proud of it.

That realization is what decides me. I growl, turn, and throw the phone across the room before crawling into bed.

As I knew it wouldn't, sleep doesn't come easily. I toss and turn and eventually drift off in the middle of the tenth imagined conversation with Lee. I wake up in the middle of the night still thinking about it, and it's still on my mind in the morning. On the drive in to the stadium, I tell myself that what he wanted was for me to be able to focus on football, so whatever

he's doing, I need to put it out of my mind and focus on the practice and the game, and tomorrow, on the film.

It's not as easy as that, but I get through the day without screwing up noticeably. In the evening, I'm calmer, and when I talk to Lee, I ask him where he watched the game from. He says it was a hotel near Alverston State. I ask when he got back to Hilltown, and he gets kind of quiet and then says it wasn't 'til this morning. I start to push harder, but it occurs to me that I'm not going to get any answers from him over the phone. Like the time when I was evading his questions about the dinner. I'll have to wait for him to meet me in person, and that means I need to earn that starting job.

I've got week four circled on my calendar, because that's the week we're at Hilltown, and if I'm not starting by then, it'll kill me to be in Lee's town and not see him. Week five would be okay, because we're at Aventira, which is only a couple hours from his place in Hilltown. By then, I've got to be starting. I'm starting to believe I can do it, the way Killer played and the way I played.

Kerina's pretty bad. We rack up 31 points and hold them to 24. More importantly, I play a good deal of the second half and stop two drives where they could've tied the game. After the game, I go out with Gerrard and Carson and the rest of the first-string defense. Killer doesn't join us. I heard later that he went out with his own crew, griping about the lack of respect he was getting.

The following week in practice, either he finally realized what was happening, or someone had a talk with him, because he practices like a demon. He's all over, screaming and pounding his chest, and making plays like I've never seen. I watch him, finally realizing how he got the starting job and what his potential is. Steez nods approvingly, and I start to get a nervous itch. Who knows why he decided to turn it on now, but if Killer keeps playing like that, my balls are going to explode by week six.

I catch Gerrard in the locker room after that practice and mention Killer's play. "Yeah," the coyote says, "we finally got through to him."

"Oh, you talked to him?" I lean casually against the locker, trying to keep my claws in. A weird, uncomfortable feeling creeps over me.

"Yeah." He grins at me. "You're doing so well, we were wondering what it was going to take for him to see that you're a real threat to take his

job. Maybe he'll come out and practice with us now."

"So you won't have to practice with me?" It comes out kind of bitter. Understandable, I think.

"Hey," he says, "we liked practicing with you. You're real good. But when he hits that next gear... phew."

"You think he can keep playing at this level?"

Gerrard nods once. "Y'ever seen his tapes?" I shake my head. "Attitude's always been his issue."

"So you don't think I'll be starting anytime soon?"

He shrugs. "Wouldn't be best for the team. But you never know what might happen. By the end of the season, if he can't keep it up, you sure could sneak in." He must see my expression, or my lashing tail, because he punches my shoulder. "Hey, you're good. By the end of the season you'll be a solid backup, or more. Another year and you could get a starting gig at half the teams in the league."

Another year? I suppress a growl of frustration and force a smile. "Thanks."

I walk out of the stadium into the cool breeze of fall. Here in Chevali, that's about eighty degrees. I think about the weather at home now, the smell of the fields and the ripening corn, how the breeze would bring the chill of autumn and I'd start to look up at the trees and see the spots of yellow on them. I think about Forester and Hilltown, where Lee is, and of the September chill that comes off the lake to let you know that it's time for classes again, and that snow is just around the corner. All I get from the September Chevali breeze is a little relief that it's not a hundred degrees at night anymore.

I roll the window of the car down as I drive home and let the warm air ruffle my fur. I think about Lee, how his thicker fur will be coming in and how he'll need it in the Hilltown autumn. There's a part of me that wants to drive to the airport instead of going home, hop on a last-minute flight to Hilltown, and surprise him. Agreement or no, I'm urged on by the double needs of wanting him and wanting to know what's going on with him. And it would be so easy just to go up there. I know that once we were together in person, we'd work it all out just like we always do.

Well, usually do. I think of his last visit and that takes some of the energy out of that impulse. What if I got all the way up there and he was reserved again, distant? I think I'd freak out. No, I'll go home like a good

tiger and call him on the phone.

I mostly manage to keep myself from whining as I tell him what Gerrard says. He listens patiently and says, "I wondered if it were something like that."

"You didn't say anything to me about it."

"I didn't want to be right. But I saw Killer play last year, when he was angling for the new contract, and you did too."

I'm lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling. "I guess I wasn't paying attention."

"You'll just have to get better," he says.

I have a hard time handling that. "Maybe you didn't hear me," I growl. "I said it could be another year."

His voice is serious, with a teasing edge. "You think I'm going to let you off the hook for that?"

"Well, what the hell am I gonna do? Smash him in the knees?"

"No," he says. "This isn't ice skating."

I stare at the bars on my ceiling and wonder whether they'd support my weight. "So what, if I end the season and I haven't started, we just won't see each other the whole off-season?"

He responds lightly, almost flippantly. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

"No," I say, "let's cross it now. I want to know what the hell is going on with my life. Two weeks ago I had a boyfriend and a great shot at a starring position. Now I've got a voice on a phone and a "maybe in a year." But hey, things with my fake girlfriend are going great. She wants to get fake married. The only good things in my life are make-believe."

"Wait, what?"

"Make-believe. You know, like all my friendships on the team."

"No, before that," he says. "The fake marriage thing."

"Oh." I explain Ogleby's engagement plan, without any of Carroll's fancy justification. "But we probably won't do it."

"I dunno," he says. "Might not be a bad idea. I wouldn't mind, if that's what you're worried about. I know you don't mean it."

"That's great," I say. "If I can't have a real boyfriend, at least I can have a fake engagement."

He sighs. "I'm sorry, hon. I know this is hard."

"You don't have any idea how hard it is." I've got one paw down on

my sheath as I say that.

"Believe me," he says, and then coughs. "Stop touching yourself."

And it's not much, but that little bit of relief, of amused connection, gets me through the night.

Not the next day, though. I'm grumpy and angry, and although I execute well during practice, I snap at teammates instead of encouraging them, grunt replies, and generally act like an asshole. I know this and it's okay with me, because I've been treated like shit, I think. So I know it's probably not a good idea for me to pick up the phone when my parents call, as I'm watching TV in my loft near the end of the day. Reflex kicks in and I pick up anyway, putting the TV sound on low.

"Just wanted to say you looked good on Sunday," Dad says, after the usual pleasantries.

That should make me feel good. It should make me feel great. But it doesn't. "Thanks," I say, my voice dull.

"Won't be long before you're starting, will it?" He sounds hopeful, happy almost.

"Yeah."

"I told Jerry down at the store on Monday, you watch, my boy's gonna be in that starting lineup. He said they changed your position around, and there was no way, but I told him. I told him."

I can't reply to that. The vise in my chest twists tighter. "So," my father goes on, "you hear anything? Maybe it'll be week after next? Definitely by Thanksgiving, right?"

It would be so easy to lie, so easy to say, "Yeah," and let the conversation slide on by. Except it's not easy at all. "Probably not," I say.

"Oh." There's the disappointment. "Well, when, then?"

"Did you see Killer play this week?"

"Killer?"

"Corey, the guy who starts at my position." He sounds bewildered. "I guess so."

"He's good. They're using me to motivate him. I'll probably be a backup for a while." I relish the bitterness of the words. "That doesn't sound very promising."

Being a career backup in the league is not a bad living, of course. I could tell him that. I could tell him how much I love the game and the challenges, the practices where everyone learns a little more about working

with each other, the way it feels when I break up an offensive play. "It's okay," I say.

"Listen, Dev, if you ever want to come work at the auto shop..."

"Christ, Dad." My voice is getting louder. "I want to play football. I don't want to work in the damn shop."

"It's a good shop," he says.

"I don't give a damn! If I wanted to work there, I'd be working there now!"

He's getting more angry now, too, rising to meet my mood. "I'm just saying, if you're not getting what you want out of this job..."

"What you want and what I want are not the same! I'm fine!" I yell.

"You don't sound very fine, is all," he says, in that tone that when I was ten meant I was real close to getting my ass whupped.

"How the hell would you know?" I growl, and without waiting for an answer, I throw the phone across the room. It smacks into a corner of the wall and makes a nasty sound as it falls, an electronic death rattle. Even from the couch, I can see the twisted shape, the exposed wires. I turn the TV up and lean back.

I have to use the phone in the locker room to call Lee the next day and leave him a message explaining why I won't be able to answer his calls for a couple days. I know I should get a new phone, but I keep putting it off, and then it's game day and there's no time any more. Week three: New Kestle.

New Kestle isn't a great team, but they're not a bad one either. They finished 8-8 last year, ahead of us in the division, and this year they're 1-1 in week three, just like us. Their main strength is the running game, which means that when I get out there, if I get out there, I'll be coming up to the line a lot. Their quarterback tends to make rash decisions, and their receivers aren't very fast. But their running back is quicksilver, a stag who can slip between the best of tacklers and who's been known to lower his head and use his antlers to clear the field when he has to. And they like to run him to the weak side—my side.

But all through the first half, it looks like I won't be seeing much action. Killer is on his game again, breaking up plays, tackling receivers, so energized that Steez has a huge smile on his cougar muzzle at halftime, with the score tied 3-3. Coach Samuelson tells us how proud he is of our defense and how the offense is going to step it up in the second half. I hear

very little of it, spending most of my time staring at the bench where, apparently, my career is headed.

Through the third quarter, we trade touchdowns and the score remains tied. I'm sitting on the sidelines at the beginning of the fourth, when New Kestle starts another drive. I should be paying more attention to the game, but I'm still feeling like the day is grey and overcast even though the sun is scorching on my fur. I look up mostly when I hear loud cheers from the crowd, which happens again about a minute into the fourth.

Only it's not a cheer, it's a collective gasp followed by a grumble that mounts into a loud booing. That's not a good sound. Means something bad happened to one of our players. I stand, with everyone else on the bench, and stare up at the replay on the big screen rather than out onto the field.

There's New Kestle's stag, sweeping around to the weak side. There's Killer, coming to meet him. The stag lowers his head.

Now, in the league, you're allowed to use antlers as weapons, if you've got 'em. The reason behind this is that according to the Orwell Act, the league can't discriminate based on species, and that includes self-mutilation, so you can't ask any of the antler crew to lop off their headgear to be eligible, though you can rule that they have to cap their points. As balance, though, defenders are also allowed to grab your antlers and use them to bring you down, if you have 'em. One of the things we went over this week was not to go for the antlers, and here's why: the safest way to grab a deer's antlers is from behind, and if you get behind this deer, chances are he'll be off to the races before you get a paw on his antlers. You definitely have to tackle him from the front or side. And — this is true for all runners, but especially ones with poky things sticking out of their heads — you have to tackle him low.

This is what Killer, in his rediscovered enthusiasm, has forgotten. On the field, he's hidden by a crowd of players, and I see our team doc, a grey stallion, trotting out with his assistants in tow. Back on the screen, Killer squares off as the deer runs at him. He guesses right, juking with the deer, but the deer's fast, and nearly gets by. Killer doesn't go low. He grabs at the antler, throwing the deer off balance. The deer stumbles forward, Killer after him. He grabs the antler again and spins the deer around, but loses his own footing in the process. They fall together, Killer on the bottom, in a slow-motion dance that is mesmerizing in its inevitability. The deer's antlers swing inexorably toward Killer's chest and shoulder, meeting them

at the same time as they hit the ground.

I gasp with the crowd as one of the antler points goes *through* the shoulder. That shouldn't happen. They cut away almost immediately, just as Killer's muzzle starts to open in a yowl, back to the first tackle. Zooming in, we can see two of the antler caps come off as Killer swipes at them. So that's how the points were exposed.

"Miski!" Steez is yelling at me. "Out there now!"

The connection finally clicks in my head between the injured player lying on the field with an antler-sized hole in his arm and my role with the team. I jump to my feet and grab my helmet.

The crowd is still quiet, stunned from the injury. As I jog out to the line, I look up at the fans, all sixty-odd thousand of them, skunks and badgers, deer and rabbits, wolves and wolverines. And foxes, lots of foxes. None of them mine, but it's not too hard to imagine him out there. I know he's watching.

Gerrard and Carson stand on either side of me as we watch Killer get carted off the field. "Don't grab the antlers," Gerrard tells me. "No fucking shit."

"They love that screen to the weak side," he says. "I'll signal if I see the formation."

We stare across the line at the stag, who's had his antlers re-capped and is talking to his quarterback. He meets our looks belligerently. "I'll break his fucking knees," I say.

Gerrard grins and punches my arm. "Good."

Carson clears his throat. When we turn to look at him, he fixes me with his feline eyes and says, "Don't fuck up."

I shake my head. They get Killer off the field and play resumes. Lining up, I start to think about it. This is it. I'm the starter now. Killer's out, he's gone, he's on the disabled list for weeks, maybe the rest of the season. It's all on me.

I'm still thinking about that when the ball snaps and I realize I have no idea what the play is. People are running around and I'm just chasing them, with no idea where I'm supposed to be. Fortunately, the play isn't in my area, and nobody really calls me on it. But I get a look from Carson, and when I glance at the sidelines and see Steez, I hear his voice in my head saying, "Back in the game!" I think of Lee, watching on TV.

We line up again. I clear my head of everything but football. The New

Kestle team lines up across from us, stylized unicorns on their helmets. I know this play, I know what I need to do. Gerrard calls to me, "Weak side screen! Weak side screen!" and I can see it developing in my mind. The ball snaps. I shadow the stag until he catches the ball, then I take his legs out from under him. Five-yard loss. I trot back to the line and pump my fist to the cheering crowd, then slap paws with Gerrard. We line up again, and I play football.

Our side holds them scoreless while our offense scratches out another score. They get the ball back and drive down the field, and I make a couple more tackles, to the point where the stag starts to avoid me. On one play, he jukes away from me and stumbles against his own teammate, giving Gerrard time to knock him down. The ball comes tumbling loose. Fisher happens to be the one closest to it. He scoops it up and starts to run. I sprint after him and tackle one of the Unicorns giving chase, leaving him clear to the end zone.

Our two-score lead holds up. We're 2-1 after three games, halfway to last season's victory total already. The mood in the locker room is barely restrained glee. Coach gives us a speech about not getting too cocky, but he's got a big canine grin on his muzzle and we're all on our feet, elbowing and punching and grinning along with him. He brings us down a bit toward the end, when he asks us to bow our heads in a quick prayer for Killer to get better fast. I don't even feel guilty about amending my prayer to say "but not so fast that I can't keep his job."

Coach and Steez come up to me afterwards, distracting me from the guys who are ribbing our stag, Kendrick, asking him why he hasn't ever put an opposing player in the hospital. Coach tells me that I did great, that for now they're going to put me in to start next week, and "we'll see how it goes" after that. But Steez grins at me as Coach leaves and says, "You do good."

I have to wait until I get home to call Lee, and that doesn't happen until after the celebratory dinner and several drinks. Okay, technically I give him a quick call from the bar to tell him I'll call him later, and he tells me I did great and then says some other stuff that makes me feel all warm and I have to hang up. But it's not 'til I get home that I curl up in bed, bouncing on the mattress and making plans to see him at his place in Hilltown next week. Even on the cheap temporary phone I had to pick up on the way to the bar, he sounds more cheerful than he has in weeks. And

if he's not quite as cheerful as I am, well, who could be? I've just gotten a starting job and a boyfriend back all in the same night. I don't even snap at Ogleby when he calls to gush at me. In fact, I tell him that we'll be on the road for the next couple weeks, but that when we get back, to set up another date with Caroll, that we'll talk then about the engagement. That sends him into spasms of agent delight, during which I do hang up.

We have Monday off, because we won. The way we've been playing, most of the guys aren't worried about our next game, at Hilltown. They're 0-3 so far this year. "We could beat 'em with one leg tied behind my back," is how Charm puts it. Still, it's my first start, and I want to make sure we don't take them lightly. That *I* don't take them lightly. So I go into the facility, exhaust myself in the weight room, and then sit in the film room to see what we'll be facing next week.

In walks Fisher. We haven't talked since the fight. He doesn't say anything, just plops down in one of the other chairs and watches along with me. I cycle through a bunch of film from Hilltown's last game, and when that one's done, I load the week 2 game.

"They suck," Fisher says.

I start to cue up the tape. "Yeah, but so did we last year."

"Not like that," he says. "They were three and thirteen and they've gotten worse."

He's right, of course. I can't see anyone who makes me the least bit nervous about facing them. But perversely, I keep arguing with him. "Don't get cocky."

He snorts. "Don't give me advice."

I let that one hang, starting the tape. We watch the game film in silence, taking notes. Colin comes in partway through, watches the game with us, and then chats a bit when the tape is over. When he asks, "Gonna watch another tape?" Fisher and I glance at each other.

"Already watched last week's," I say, and toss it to him. "It's pretty much the same."

"Yeah," Fisher says. "I'm gonna hit the weights."

"Right." Colin heads for the VCR as Fisher and I leave.

Outside in the hall, it's clear he wants to say something but doesn't know what. So I start. "Great touchdown."

"Thanks for the block. And congrats on the starring job," he says.

"Hey, I didn't arrange for idiot-boy to get his arm gored."

"He's out six weeks is what I hear," Fisher says. I don't respond, but in my head I'm thinking *is that enough? Can I clinch the job?* He goes on after a minute. "I talked to you and you didn't slug me. So I guess that's a good sign."

I stop at the weight room. "If you want me to, we can go in here." I peer in the window. "Though it looks like Jaws is working out. Whose side you think he'd be on?"

He's got that look he gets when he thinks I'm being stupid. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"Shoot." I fold my arms.

He shakes his head, and then rubs his muzzle. "What the hell was that all about?"

I laugh, and start to walk down the hall. He doesn't move. I turn back toward him. "Seriously?"

He inclines his head. From inside the weight room, we can hear the wolverine straining at the weights. "I say a couple nice things and you fly off the handle."

"Nice things?" The workout sounds cut off as the door clicks shut. "You acted so fucking superior, so smug..." His eyes widen. "It's like, it's like, what if you got demoted to backup, and I came in and patted you on the back and said how great it was that you took the backup role because that's what was best for the *team*." I spit the last word out.

"I'd be fine with that," he says. "I mean, if I couldn't perform, and there was a guy who could play better..."

"It'd kill you inside, wouldn't it?" I say. "Not to be able to go out there again, to play the game the way you can still play it in here." I smack my chest, staring into his eyes. "To watch from the sidelines as other guys get to take the field, to pace back and forth and not be able to join in, just because your body doesn't let you... or what if you knew you could still play the game—what if we switched to a 3-4 defense and suddenly they don't need another tackle? What if you're on the sidelines because of the way your life has gone, not because you can't play any more, but because you can't play in the way the team wants? And someone comes over and pats you on the back and tells you in that smug fucking tone of voice that you're a great guy for giving up your chance to play because it's best for the team?"

Now he furrows his brow. "But you got the starting job," he says.

"You're starting next week."

"Jesus fucking Lion Christ," I say. "Forget it. Thanks for not reporting me."

"I don't want you suspended," he says, "if that's what you're thinkin'."

I push open the door to the weight room again, and he grabs my arm. "Listen, Dev," he says. "I ain't so quick any more, on the field or up here." He taps his head. "But I ain't a bigot. I just want to make sure you got that clear."

"Crystal," I snap. He looks to follow me out, like the conversation is over, but I've got something else simmering, and I don't feel like holding it back. "Just one thing, though."

His relaxed expression gets more guarded; his ears go back and his eyes narrow. "What?"

"That Tony Calhoun you told me about. That's the name, right?"

He doesn't take a step back, but his weight shifts in that direction, away from me. Like a defensive set. "Yeah."

"There's all kinds of stuff on the Internet now, you know." Actually, I had Lee look him up for me. It was much quicker that way. Fisher narrows his eyes and keeps quiet as I talk. "The thing is, I remember you telling me he was gone when you got into the league. Funny thing, though. The rosters show he played on your team your rookie year. Started, even."

"Did he?"

"Why'd you lie to me, Fish?"

He shifts forward again, like he does just before the snap, ready to push his weight into the oncoming player. "Hell," he says, "it was over a decade ago. I played on plenty of teams since then. Guys come and go."

"You remembered everything else pretty clear." I lean forward too, just to see him flinch back. "I just can't figure that. You ashamed of something?"

He doesn't say anything to that. I shrug and go outside to the track, to cool down with a run, because I feel all amped up.

It's not just from Fisher, though. Starting Tuesday, I practice with the first team, where everything feels a half-step faster. Fortunately, all my work with Gerrard and Carson makes it easy for me to step into that role. Tuesday and Wednesday, Steez peppers our practices with jibes at me, about how Corey would've made that play, or Corey would've been in the right spot there. Those comments tail off as the week goes on. By

Saturday, I feel pretty well prepared for whatever Hilltown's going to throw at us.

Fall's come early to Hilltown. The open-air stadium is one of the Dragons' great advantages, or used to be back when they were good. In the frigid cold of December, visiting teams from domes or hot-weather areas like Chevali are at a significant disadvantage. Early in the season, it's not as much of a problem—usually. This Sunday we've got thirty-mile-an-hour winds and driving rain, making it hard to see more than ten feet in front of you.

But the stands are still full. This is McLauden Stadium, and even if the Dragons fans have to come out in thermal parkas and oilskins, damned if they're going to miss a game for something as trivial as weather. Right near the tunnel where we come out, there's a group of shirtless wolves, fur around their huge white bellies dyed green. The colors are running through their soaked grey fur, but their passionate screaming and fist-pumping almost keeps me from laughing.

And we run out onto the field, and the PA says, "Number Fifty-seven, Devlin Miski," and for a moment I don't feel the wind or the rain. There's been mostly silence from the crowd as the Firebirds are introduced, but my name gets a smattering of cheers. I hadn't even thought that people might remember me from my Forester days. For a moment, I'm back there, standing on the crappy grass at Birch Stadium, hearing the cheers for my name. I'm in the starting lineup again and we're good, and I don't have any doubt about my ability to hang with anyone on the other team. I look toward the section of the stadium where I always saw a vixen looking back at me, up behind our bench halfway up, but of course, halfway up the stands here is halfway to the clouds, and there are a hundred vixens behind the curtain of the rain. I pretend mine is one of them as I raise a paw to the stands, spinning in a circle before I jog out to join my teammates.

The weather comes back to me fast, standing around waiting for the game to start. The field is slippery, the ball is worse, and visibility never gets any better. That puts all the burden on the offense. Even when the cold and rain set in, I don't lose my hyped-up energy. Gerrard, Carson, and I mesh well as a unit, though it probably helps that Hilltown's offense is even more uninspired than it looked on the film. I make a few good tackles, Carson pressures the quarterback into several bad throws, and the only thing that we allow is a field goal that just barely clears the crossbar

and would've been ten yards short without the wind pushing it.

Still, we go into halftime down 3-0. The locker room is cold and wet, leading Jaws to say that they broke the heat specifically in the visitors' locker room. Rumor is that kind of thing happens a lot, but I've never heard it actually proven. Charm stomps around and promises us he'll tie it up if we just get him into range. The smell of wet fur and musk is thick in the air, but it's a good smell, a team smell, and we joke about whose fur smells the worst when wet. The foxes are voted the winners.

Usually Coach puts in the second team for a few series late in the third quarter, but with the game this close, I guess he doesn't want to risk anything. So Gerrard, Carson, and I are out there every defensive series in the wind and rain. We keep each other psyched, feeding off each other's energy. I don't tell them that I keep looking at the stands behind our bench and drawing inspiration from a vixen who isn't there and isn't even a vixen. It doesn't matter where you get your inspiration from as long as you've got it and make good use of it.

With us anchoring the defense, we hold pretty well. On the first series of the fourth quarter, they're driving again, and I sniff out a bootleg play, where the quarterback keeps the ball and runs to the weak side, to my side. I dive at him, swipe at the ball, and feel it come loose.

The wind, the rain, the wolf in the green and white uniform, everything else disappears. There's only the ball, skidding along the wet surface a few feet in front of me. My muscles tense, my breathing quickens. I feel a surge of heat in my blood. My feet scrabble and slip on the muddy ground. Somehow, I leap forward. My paws close around the ball.

That second hangs frozen in time. I can taste the mud in my mouth. The ball shines with its own light. Then bodies slam into me from all angles. Paws grab at the ball, dig into my nose, punch me in the back. I curl protectively around the precious ball and close my eyes tightly until I hear the whistle blow. Slowly, the pile is peeled away from me. When I can stand up, I lift the ball in one paw and hold it like a trophy all the way back to our cheering, whooping bench.

"Keep it, Miski," Coach Samuelson says with his wolf's grin.

I've sunk my claws into it, so the refs need to get a new one anyway. "Yes, sir!" I say. I know my muzzle's shorter than his, but in that minute I feel like my grin is every inch as long and wide.

We get Charm into position, a thirty-yarder. Not a chip shot, especially into the wind, but he's got the leg to do it. The whole team links arms, bouncing on our heels to watch the attempt. In a game like this, every point is precious. Charm backs up. They snap the ball. Feliz, the Mexican wolf who backs up Aston at quarterback, catches the ball out of the air and sets it down as Charm charges forward.

The massive stallion is two feet from the ball when he slips. Just slightly, but enough. He connects solidly with the ball, which hurtles end-over-end through the air—

—and sails wide left by a foot.

The crowd screams in delight. We collapse, deflated. Charm stalks back to the bench. A couple of the guys say nice things like "it's muddy out there" and "not your fault," but he swats angrily at their words and drops himself on the end of the bench, glaring at nothing. After a moment, he takes his helmet off and wings it at the ground.

I have to go back out on defense, but we stop them quickly. When our series is over, I plunk myself down next to Charm, still sitting alone, still staring at his muddy helmet. "Fuckin' weather," I say. "Look, the cheerleaders are all covered up. Damn shame, huh?"

He grunts. I elbow him. "Look, all we gotta do is get you out there again. Then you're gonna be sorry you let all that mud in your helmet. It'll be all in your ears, running down that big honker of a snout..."

"Chee, Gramps, I'm sure glad I have you around." He says it sarcastically because he means it.

"I'm glad we have you around, too. Hey, it could be worse." He glares at me. I point to the opposite bench, where a short rabbit sits nervously flexing his paws. "You could be their kicker."

His lips pull back in a small equine grin. He punches me on the shoulder. "Ain't it about time for you to go back out?"

We watch a pass from Aston slip through the paws of Ty Nakamura. "Just 'bout," I say. "Looks like we won't be getting you out there on this series." I leave him like that. He isn't staring at the cheerleaders, but at least he isn't staring at his helmet.

He never gets a chance to put it on again. We lose the game 3-0.

The locker room is dispirited afterwards, but Coach picks us up. "This is one of those games," he says. "I don't mind losing a game like this." He pauses, while ears around the locker room perk up. "Okay, that's a lie." He

grins a fierce, nasty grin. "I hate losing. I hate losing any game. But a loss like this, when you guys played your hearts out and you were not only playing the guys on the other side of the field, but the wind and rain? I'll take it. Because I know if we play this game again ten times, we win eight of 'em. If we play it ten times in perfect weather, we win all ten. So clean up, get to the plane by nine, and we'll practice at home tomorrow."

There's no griping about the Monday practice; we lost, after all. I toss the ball I recovered into my locker. Should I keep it? I mean, we lost. What kind of souvenir is that? But it is my first fumble recovery in the bigs.

Coach solves the issue for me, coming over as I'm getting out of my pads. "Nice recovery, Miski," he says. "First one, right?"

He's still soaked, too, his pants and shoes muddy. Around us, other guys are heading for the showers to clean up. Hopefully there's hot water. "Yeah," I say, and the warmth in my chest makes the cold in the locker room more bearable.

"Hang onto that one. There'll never be another first."

"Thanks." I grin again. "It felt good."

"I bet. Come on, I want to talk to you in the office here. Won't take long."

I follow him to a small office off the locker room. It looks like it doubles as a medical room. I sit down in a chair next to a stack of boxes marked "SteriliFur." Coach sits across the wide desk.

"Nice work today," he says. "You went to Forester, I know. Got family around here?"

"They had tickets, but I don't know if they made it to the game." Mom might have looked at the weather and decided that TV would be fine. I know Lee made it, but he was probably sitting in the Dragons' team box or something.

He nods. "All I wanted to tell you is that the GM is going to sign another linebacker this week. We want to bring in someone who can back you up while Mitchell rehabs. You've got the starring job until he comes back, but then you go back to backing him up. Understood? Nobody loses a starting job because of an injury."

"What if I play better than him?"

His expression doesn't change. "You'll get a chance to prove that the first few weeks he's back. He doesn't get to keep his starring job just because he's coming back from injury, and I'll make that clear to him as

well. All I wanted you to know is that the guy we're signing this week isn't coming in to replace you."

"Who is it?"

He shakes his head. "Don't know. There are a few out there. I'll just take whoever they send me. I don't make that decision."

"I'm going to keep starring," I tell him.

His eyes meet mine. "Prove it," he says. I don't change my expression, I just nod, but inside I'm lighting up because I know he's giving me a chance. He likes what he saw and he thinks I can take the starting job. "Go shower," he says. "See your family. I'll see you at nine."

Given half an hour to shower and dress, twenty minutes to get to Lee's, and twenty to get to the airport, that gives me three hours and twenty minutes with him. If I can cut ten minutes off my shower-and-dress time, I can make it three and a half. I strip off my uni and head to the shower while most of the rest of the guys are dressing. Fisher and Gerrard wave at me and try to say something, but it doesn't seem urgent, so I just wave 'em off and head for the deserted shower.

I take a long shower, trying to warm up and wash away the mud of McLauden. It's a great historic place, blah blah blah. Playing there on the visiting team sucks. I am in a hurry, but I also want to be nice and clean for Lee, so by the time I get out, the locker room's almost deserted. Gerrard stuck around to tell me that a few of the guys are going to dinner together. I tell him I've got family in town and that I'll see him at nine.

While I'm pulling my clothes on, he and the other guy take off, leaving me alone in the locker room. I'm all dressed and just debating whether to take the ball with me to show Lee—it's beyond cool, but it's also filthy and muddy—when I hear his voice behind me. "Nice work, sweetie."

I spin around so fast that I catch my shirt on the locker clasp. He's standing there in the doorway in a mint-green polo shirt and tight jeans, smiling or smirking or something at me. "What the..." I stare at him.

He waves a black paw down his shirt and pants. "I'm not in drag," he says softly.

Christ, it's good to see him again. I can't process it. It's like after that first summer, only more so, because I know him so much better and there's so much of me in him, him in me. We step toward each other, then run toward each other and I pick him up, mumbling something into his cheek ruff about how much I've missed him, spinning his slender body around

until he laughs and nuzzles my ears.

"Missed you too," he says when I finally put him down. His paws stroke my sides, his musk fills the air and I don't want to stop breathing in.

"I thought I was coming to your place." I keep squeezing his sides, wanting to make sure he's real.

"Ah, why waste the time for us to drive there when we're both right here." He tilts his head and his eyes sparkle.

"Here?" I look around. "But the equipment guys... the coaches..."

"Oh, not here in *here*. I made sure we'd have a few minutes alone now, just enough time to get to this other little place I know about."

"How did you get in here?"

His paw slips down to his waist, and for a moment I have this crazy thought that he's going to undo his pants. Instead he flips up the badge dangling at his belt, a picture of him with the Dragons logo and a scent-mark on it. "Come on," he says. "I know a nice, private room that nobody's going to be using for a while."

"Does it have a bed?" I reach down to swat at his wagging tail as he leads me away.

He looks over his shoulder with sultry, half-lidded eyes. "How about a couch?"

I'm about to say that even the concrete will probably be fine when there's a scuffle from outside the locker room door. Lee's ears go straight up, as mine do. We can see shadows moving behind the glass, in the dark hallway, but over the thick smell of wet fur, we can't catch any scents. I run for the door; he stands frozen, looking around the room (for somewhere to hide, he tells me later).

Before I get to the door, it swings open. Fisher steps in, holding something silver in one paw and a struggling spotted skunk in the other. Now I can catch his scent, and it curls my paws into fists. I stop a foot from where Brian is almost dangling by his shirt collar. He stops struggling, his hackles rising. "Don't touch me," he squeaks. "I swear, I'll... Lee, don't let them hurt me."

"You know this guy," Fisher says, his calm bass cutting through Brian's panting pleas. "Figures."

"I barely know him," I say. I start to say more, but Lee steps forward.

"I know him," the fox says. His voice is so dead that I take a step back and look at him. His eyes are narrowed, but no longer sultry. They're fixed

on the object Fisher's holding in his other paw, which I haven't taken the time to see what it is yet. "You shouldn't have come, Brian."

"I told you I would," he snaps. Even though he's not struggling, he's still tense, but the look on his muzzle is a savage grin. "And it's a good thing. You're gonna see." He looks at me and Fisher as though we'd just asked him for his lunch money.

"Let 'im go, Fish," I say. "What's that?"

Fisher looks at me and drops Brian, then holds out his other paw. The silver thing is a small camcorder.

Lee and I just stare at it for several seconds that seem like minutes. I'm the first one to get my voice back. "You were *taping* us?"

"For his blog," Lee says.

I turn to the fox. "You knew about this?"

He shakes his head. "Not the taping."

Fisher's look catches my attention. "In the locker room?" he says.

"He works for the Dragons," I say.

Brian's straightening his shirt. "Fucking Neanderthal," he says.

I ignore the remark. "He made sure there wasn't anyone around."

"Brian, you can't write about this," Lee says, with more spirit.

Brian sneers. "Ha! You kidding?"

"Still," Fisher says to me, "I told you—I warned you."

"I'm serious," Lee says. "Don't you care about me?"

"I know what you said." I'm looking over Brian's head at Fisher. The fact that I had nothing to do with this, that it was all Lee's idea, doesn't seem relevant. The camera in his paw does. "Thanks."

"*You're* serious," Brian says. "Are you kidding? You know how many readers I'll get? Plus I get to out this guy, too."

"You're not exposing anyone," Fisher says, holding up the camera. "Not without this."

"Oh, so you're stealing that?" Brian says.

"You're trespassing," Lee says. His voice has gone dead again.

Brian waves that aside. "That's not news. I'll get fined or something. An athlete assaulting a fan? I'll be on sports news for weeks."

Fisher and I lock eyes. Lee holds out his paw. "Let me see the camera?" When Fisher doesn't move, he says, "Please?"

Fisher hands him the camera. Lee fiddles with it and pops out a tape, then throws the camera to Brian. "There. No theft now."

Brian points at the tape. "What do you call that?"

"Illegally recorded footage of a private area without permission," Lee says. "Read the fine print on your ticket."

"So you're on their side. You've always been on their side." Brian starts backing away, tapping the side of his head. "I've still got it all up here."

I look at Lee. "Can we just let him go?" Lee shrugs. "Listen," I say, pointing at Brian. "If you write anything about this..."

He straightens, near the door now. "You'll what?" he sneers. "Lose your job? Lose your precious starting role? Lose your boyfriend?"

"No," Lee says quietly.

Brian scowls. "Turncoat," he says, and he's gone.

The three of us stare at each other. "Maybe I should leave you two alone," Fisher says. "Or maybe y'all should leave me alone."

He looks at the door, while Lee and I look at each other. "Thanks, Fish," I say again. "Did you follow him?"

He shakes his head. "Coach said he held you late. I came back to see if you wanted to join us. I saw him holding the camera to the door. He backed into me and I grabbed the camera."

"And him." Lee sighs. "Probably just made things worse."

"Hey." Fisher looks at Lee, then at me. "You would've wanted me to let him go with the video of you two?"

"We weren't doing anything," I say.

Lee gives me a small raise of the eyebrow. "He has a history," he says to Fisher. "You couldn't know."

"Well, shit," Fisher says.

"Hey." I step toward him and put a paw out. "Thanks. I know you were trying to do the right thing."

He looks at the paw. Slowly, he grasps it, and looks up at me. "Have been for a while now," he says. "So what are you gonna do about this?"

I glance at Lee. "He's the smart one. So what are we gonna do?"

Lee looks at the tape in his paw. "Not much we can do. I guess you should call your agent and get ready for some damage control."

"Oh, that's gonna be fun." I kick the bench, and as if on cue, my cell phone rings. I glance at the number—Ogleby, of course—and toss it into my locker. Lee and Fisher look at me, so I do a passable impression of a squeaky ferret. "Omigod why didn't you tell me now your value's going to

go down and I had three teams interested in talking to you!"

They laugh, shortly. "Come on," Lee says, walking across the room. "We've still got a little time."

"Yeah." I bump Fisher on my way to the door, but it's a friendly bump. "See you at nine."

"Hey, Miski?" he says.

I turn. He looks past me to Lee, waiting at the door. "Never mind. I'll talk to ya later."

I don't need any more encouragement. I leave him standing in the middle of the locker room and follow Lee down the corridor. He takes me to a small film room with a windowless door that locks, and we make excellent use of the three hours remaining in our evening. Touching him again is like coming home. It doesn't hurt when he whispers, "Starter..." in my ear. We move together with energy and passion, and any vague memories of the listless sex from our last meeting are blown away.

Afterwards, cuddling on the couch with the particular urgency gone, I stroke the fur between his ears. I don't want to bring up Brian, but things keep gnawing at me and I can't help it. "Should I ask now?" I say. "Or would it ruin the moment?"

He shifts, the light weight of his slender form brushing against me. I feel a stirring in my groin and figure we'll be ready for more before I have to go get dressed. The soft weight of his tail settles across me. "You remember how we met?"

"Of course." I brush the line of his back.

"Brian's still on that crusade, still out for revenge." He sighs. "It's... it's sad, it's twisted him. He used to be..." The dark room is quiet save for our breathing as he looks back into the past. "More hopeful, I guess." His fingers rub my chest. "He told me that he was going to out someone this season. Make a name for himself."

"And ruin someone else's."

"He figures once one player's outed, others will come out because they won't be the first. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one."

"In his Star Trek universe, sure."

"Yeah, he hasn't spent much time around actual football players." I tighten my arms around him. "After he saw you with Carroll, he was even more convinced you were going to fuck me over."

"I think I just did," I say.

He nips my shoulder lightly. "He hated you pretending to be straight. I hoped... I tried to go along with him, encourage him to investigate someone else, but nothing worked. Then he said he was going to follow me around to get pictures of us."

"Oh. That's why you didn't want to see me."

The ceiling light reflects in his eyes as he pulls back to look at me. "Until you got the starting job. Then you'd be more valuable. If he did... if he does publish something about us, you've got a better chance now."

"Of what?"

"Of keeping your job."

I push that thought away. It felt so good to walk out and be announced in the starting lineup, I can't bear to think of that feeling being taken away. "What about my boyfriend?" I say teasingly.

"You've always got that," he says.

It hits me then, thinking about the passion in our lovemaking just now, how hard it's been on him to be apart from me. At least as hard as it's been for me, maybe more, and he didn't have me to get angry at. I feel like a complete heel, unworthy of him. The best I can do is hold him right and press my muzzle into his cheek fur. I can't even come up with words. So we find something else to do, again, better than words.

Panting and happy, we kiss and fumble around getting our clothes on. I've just got time for a quick shower in the locker room, but I hate to leave him. "See you in Aventira next week?" I say.

"You bet," he says, and leaves me with a kiss.

When I get back to the locker room, I've missed ten calls from Ogleby. I don't have time to talk to him tonight, with the plane leaving and all, so I put the phone on silent and join the team.

It's a quiet ride back. A few of the guys are talking about the game, which seems to me like a day or two ago already. I sit next to Fisher, who doesn't want to talk about the game either. We both put our music players on and spend the four hours of the flight dozing. Even though we don't talk, it's nice to share that companionship again with him. I don't trust him, but at least I don't hate him anymore. For now, that's a step forward.

When I do talk to Ogleby, on the way to practice, he takes a minute to gush about my performance and tell me how great I am before he presses me again about the engagement. "When do you think you'll be ready?"

"I dunno," I say. "I'll talk to Carroll about it."

"Great, that's great. I talked to her agent and we're already writing up the press releases. It's gonna be terrific, kid, you'll see."

I stop at a traffic light. "Don't get too far along."

"Hey," he says, "you can't back out now. This will really move things along for you. Trust me, kid, I know what's best for a career, I've managed a million of 'em. You're not backing out, are you?"

"I just don't know if I need it now. I'm starring, and—"

"So you need it more than ever! Never hurts to get a little extra boost, am I right?"

"Whatever. Listen, Ogleby, you monitor all the press and blogs and stuff, right?"

"Sure, kid, haven't gotten a chance to look at the net this morning, but it usually takes a while before the stuff comes out, right?"

"Yeah. Can you tell me if there's something up on that guy Brian's blog?" The light turns and I pull through.

"Who? Why? Did you do something bad?" He doesn't sound all that upset about the idea.

"No. Well... no. Just look out for it and let me know if you find anything. And don't do anything until I say so, got it?"

"Right, of course not, kid, I'd never do anything without your say-so, you know that. So what am I looking for?"

"I don't really know," I say, and then I hear something I never thought I'd hear in a phone conversation with Ogleby: silence.

After a couple seconds, I start to worry that maybe he's had a heart attack or a stroke or something. "Ogleby?"

He makes a strangled noise in reply. Then it's as if he cleared some blockage out of his throat. "What the hell does he think he's doing? He can't write that about you! Oh, kid, he's in for a world of shit. You believe me when I tell you he will be sorry he ever hit enter to post that. A world of shit. You listen to me, don't worry about this, I am going to take care of it. Oh, that punk, that little snot-nosed shit-faced dick-brained who the hell does he think he can just fuck with a professional like this?"

I don't know if he means him or me. I try to get a word in, but the ferret just keeps on going and finally says, "I got this, I got this, you just focus on football," and hangs up on me.

I'd be worried if I had time to be worried. As soon as I get to the stadium, I'm immersed in plays and drills. The only time I have off is when

some of the guys go to see Corey — Killer — in the hospital. Everyone agrees that I probably wouldn't be his favorite person to see. So I take the time to do a few extra reps in the weight room. By this time, I've forgotten all about Brian and his blog, a happy condition that lasts almost all the way to dinner, when Lee calls me.

"Hey," he says, "I'm going to assume Ogleby just went off and did this without asking you."

"Oh, fuck." The rabbit behind the counter at the sandwich shop looks alarmed. "Sorry," I tell him, and wave the people behind me forward. "What?"

"You haven't seen it yet?"

"I've been at practice all day. I was just at Hot Pickle grabbing dinner."

"You should maybe sit down." He pauses a second, then says, "Brian wrote this thing about you on the blog, not naming names, but it's pretty clear who he means if you stop to think about it. "A certain recently promoted tiger playing defense for the Firebirds uses his defensive buddy as security to stop people from finding out about his secret gay relationship. ""

I groan. "Fucking prick."

"Well," Lee says, "yes. But nobody really pays attention to him. His blog had three comments on it this afternoon, and one was from that presidential candidate who wants to abolish the court system. But then around four o'clock, Ogleby sent out a press release denouncing Brian, calling him "a screaming monkey who can't bear not to be hearing the sound of his own voice" and saying that he'd "make up any kind of lies he thinks will get him a couple more hits. ""

"Christ." I look up at the TV, currently showing a baseball playoff game, as though they're going to break into the game with the news: Football Player's Agent Insists He's Not Gay, Makes Millions Wonder.

"A couple of the mainstream sports blogs picked it up. One of them went on a long rant about how the culture of football oppresses gay men, yeah, great. Another's cautious, saying they want to see what else comes to light before making a call."

"Shit."

"It's not the worst thing in the world."

The guy behind the counter is occupied with his customers, not looking at me. I don't know why I feel like everyone already knows but

me. "You don't sound all that upset."

"It doesn't seem like it's that bad yet. I don't know what we can do other than hope the mainstream doesn't pick up on it."

"Why'd you tell me to sit down, if it isn't that bad?"

"Because I knew you would stress about it. Don't stress, okay? Have your two beef sandwiches and call Ogleby and tell him to calm down."

That is, more or less, what I do, though not in that order. Ogleby isn't answering his phone, so I leave him a voicemail that goes on probably longer than it should, and louder than it should. It's after hanging up that I realize I should probably go find and read the full text of the press release. First, though, I get my beef sandwiches home, I crack open a beer, and I sit down to watch sports highlights. Nothing about my boyfriend makes the top ten plays, so I'm a bit calmer by the time I fire up the computer.

Reading the entirety of Ogleby's press release, which he's e-mailed to me, just gets me worked up again. I stop short of throwing the computer against the wall, because it's an expensive piece of hardware, but I do call Ogleby back again and leave him another message, longer and louder than the first, consisting of quoting sections of his press release interspersed with repeating basically the same things I'd said in the first voicemail.

He calls me the next morning, when I'm a little cooler, but I don't pick up. I don't want to be more distracted by this today when I have football to focus on.

Sadly, I don't get much of a chance. First thing that happens is that Coach Samuelson and Steez call me into Coach's office. I know right away what it's about. Coach is snarling, and Steez just looks annoyed. The computer on his desk is humming. I can't see the screen, but I don't need to.

"I don't give a crap what you do when you're not here." Coach dives right in. "Ladies, guys, livestock, whatever. What I care about is when it becomes a distraction that makes my job harder. Are you trying to make my job harder?"

"No, sir." I dismiss the image conjured up by him saying "livestock." "My agent issued that statement without my authorization."

He holds up a finger, blunt claw pointing to the ceiling. Neither he nor Steez looks mollified. "That's one thing. What happened last night up in Hilltown?"

The office is warm, in contrast to the cold locker room the night

before. It feels like it just got a few degrees warmer. "Oh, uh, this friend of mine came in to see me..."

While I'm searching for the right words to talk about it, Coach growls, his ears back. "I told you, I don't give a flying fuck what you do with your private life, but I need to know so I can deal with this. Is he more than just a friend?"

"No," I blurt out. "Just a friend, a college buddy." Steez and Coach exchange glances. Coach says, more quietly, "So what happened?"

"He works for the Dragons now, so he came down to say hi. And this guy, Brian, he, uh, he and my friend used to date but they broke up, and now he thinks we're going out. So he came down to spy on us, and Fisher caught him."

Steez leans forward. "What about "property damage"?"

My claws flex in and out, fortunately out of sight of the two coaches. "He had a video camera. Fisher took it from him."

Coach leans back and folds his arms. "Christ Wolf. All right, we'll talk to Fisher. So far, this asshole hasn't filed assault charges, at least." He fixes me with the stare I've only seen in games, when someone comes off the field after muffing a play. "That's the whole truth?"

I pause. I'm not quite sure why I didn't trust Coach and Steez, except that since yesterday, I don't feel like trusting anyone. And having lied, I can't go back on it now. "Yeah."

He sends me out, telling me to let him know if anyone gives me a hard time. I nod, though of course I won't, because I don't want to cause any more distractions. And of course, the first one to come up to me as I head for my locker is Charm, towering over me in an undershirt and jockstrap. He knocks the wind out of me with a giant slap on the back. "Hey, Gramps," he booms, "why'n't ya just tell me you wanted to go to the Chippendales instead? 'S'all cool."

"Shut up," I mutter. Some of the other guys are grinning and elbowing each other. A couple are looking away from me, including Colin and Brick. I can't tell if it's intentional or not.

"Ah, just funnin'." Charm grins. "You gotta fire that agent, though. Want mine?"

"Yeah, maybe." I haven't decided what to do about Ogleby yet.

The stallion grins and points down at his jock. "I got his number right here, just reach in and get it."

Laughter breaks out. Not all over, but enough. "Fuck off," I say. I'm getting the queasy feeling of being inside one of my dreams. I try to focus on getting into my uniform.

"Ah, sourpuss," Charm says. "That time of the month, huh?"

More laughter. I flatten my ears and ignore him. Thankfully, that seems to be it. He gives me another pat on the back to show it's all in fun (for him) and then we go out and practice and I don't hear anything more about it.

I don't hear anything—but I start to notice little things. A couple of the guys, not all of them by any means, but a couple, seem to be shying away from me in the contact drills, and again, Brick is one of them. When Colin and I brush on a play, he jerks away and runs back to the line before I can say anything. I'm pretty sure I'm not being paranoid, but I don't want to make a big deal of it, and it's hard to complain about a feeling, especially on a football team. Gerrard and Carson don't treat me any differently, but the longer we practice, the more my whiskers tingle as if thunderclouds are gathering, like they used to on the plains back home.

When we hit the showers, I notice Brick and his friends hanging back. They look at me as I go in, and they don't go in until I come out. I feel my claws flexing again.

"What's with them?" Gerrard says.

"My stupid agent," I say.

He smirks. "That statement? I saw it on the web last night. Just seemed like the standard thing. Angry fan makes up a story, people jump on it 'til it goes away. Don't worry about it."

I grab my cell phone, noting the blinking light. I'm sure Ogleby's called at least three times. I don't want to talk to him right now. "Seems like some people around here need that advice too."

Gerrard follows my look to the showers. He shrugs. "That'll last a couple days. You doing anything for dinner?"

I indicate the phone. "Sandwiches and damage control."

He punches my shoulder. "Enjoy. Seeya tomorrow."

There are actually sixteen messages on my phone. Twelve are from Ogleby, charting the progression of his moods from puzzled at my messages through defensive, conciliatory, and back up to excited as he relays interview requests from some media outlets. Interspersed with these are two messages from my parents, one from Carroll, and one from Lee,

which simply consists of him saying, "Call me." Three guesses which message I respond to first, when I open the phone next to my car.

"Did it get any worse today?"

He sighs. "Not really bad. Picked up by another couple blogs."

I lean on the roof of the car. "I got some requests for interviews. How the hell are media stations paying attention to some asshole's website? What if I just wrote some crap about him on a website?"

"You're an athlete. Ogleby didn't help, issuing an official press release. It got people's attention. Now the major sports blogs are watching his, and the media watches them."

"Fuck." I watch Colin and some other rookie walk out. They glance at me and then walk pointedly away, talking more closely. "Did you hear from *him*?"

The pause before he says "No" is so long that I know better.

"Come on," I press.

"He called and left a message. I didn't call back."

The evening air is warm, but there's a nice breeze. "What did he say?"

"It's not important."

"Lee..."

I hear him typing at a keyboard. "He was very happy about having outed you. He was delighted at the thought that finally there might be an openly gay active pro player."

I feel the growl building in my chest. "You sure he wasn't just happy at having ended my career?"

"Your career isn't over. You're starting."

I tell him about the guys in practice, the talk with Coach. "Now I have to call Ogleby back and decline all the interviews, and that's going to be suspicious."

"Just go out with Carroll again." His voice flattens as he says it.

"It's only a matter of time now before it's out. Then nobody will want to play with me, and Coach will say I'm a distraction, and that'll be that. Tony Calhoun all over again."

"They don't do that anymore," Lee says, without conviction. "What about that guy who came out a couple years ago? Retired on his own terms."

"After eight years of keeping secrets and looking over his shoulder and not having a stable relationship ever."

"Go call Ogleby," he says. "I'll be up late working."

I call Ogleby, who is now delighted at all the press coverage we'll get denying the charges. I have to argue with him for half an hour before he even understands why I'm choosing to skip the interviews. I tell him to think about what'll happen if the rumors get any larger, that I'll be out of the league and he'll be out a commission, and he just comes back with the insistence that that's why I have to do the denials. I leave him with the compromise that I'll go out with Carroll one night this week and get into the papers.

Which means I have to call her next. She's happy to fly out for an evening to help me out. By this time, my stomach's growling, so I get in the car and call my parents on the way to the sandwich shop.

My father's almost beside himself. "You can sue this guy for libel," he says. "Or is it slander if it's on the Internet?"

"I'm not suing anyone," I tell him.

"He's making false assertions that are intended to deprive you of your livelihood. Of course you can sue him." When my dad gets on rolls like this, the best thing to do is just nod and let him talk. On the phone, I can't really do that.

"It'd just give him more publicity if I do."

"You need to prove to the world that he's a liar, hold him up and expose him. You can't let these people get away with their lies or they'll just keep on lying."

My stomach churns. I need those sandwiches. "It's not worth it, Dad."

"Your reputation isn't worth it? Your livelihood isn't worth it?"

"Jesus Lion, Dad, leave it alone."

"All the guys at the shop were asking about it. They were asking if you're going to start the next game in a tutu."

I'm hitting all the red lights. I desperately want to get to the sandwich shop so I have an excuse to end this conversation. "Great, Dad."

"I almost got in a fight."

"Over their progressive view of gay people?"

"Jerry stuck up for you. You remember him?"

"The wolverine who fixed my Buick?"

"He said from the action that car saw, there was no way you were queer."

Hearing that word from my father makes my fur prickle. "Tell Jerry

thanks." The light changes, finally. I floor it.

"How are things going with Carroll? Is she upset about that?"

I screech around a corner. "I'm seeing her Wednesday."

"Ask her about suing for libel. Those Hollywood people know all about defamation of character."

"Dad — " I hear sirens. Fuck. "I gotta go. I'll talk to you later."

I pull the SUV over and sit slumped over with my muzzle resting against the steering wheel. The cop, a big brown bear, comes waddling up to the car. I roll the window down and lean back as he approaches. This is just great. This day just had to get worse, didn't it?

"Evening, sir," he says. "License and registration, please."

I hand it over. He studies it for a moment while I get my credit card ready. He doesn't go back to his car or anything, just looks at the license, then at me. "Everything okay?" I ask.

"Yes, sir," he says. He hands me back the scent card and the car paperwork and ignores the credit card I'm handing out to him. "Just wanted to ask you to keep it down a bit in the city."

"That's all?" I feel a slow wash of relief.

"That's all." He touches the brim of his hat. "Also, good luck against Aventira." He smiles and waves. "Have a good one."

I sit behind the wheel until he's gone. I haven't gotten out of a ticket since college. It's as if the thunderclouds parted just for a moment to let through the sun. Finally one thing went right today.

When I do get home, the phone and computer stay off in favor of Football '08. I arbitrarily proclaim some of the video game players gay as I move them around. I have no idea what to do. The more I dig myself into this hole, this "image," as Carroll calls it, the more I have to remember what I've told people and what I haven't, and the more alone I feel. So do I go out of my way to loudly proclaim my heterosexuality, like I did when I thought I was? It'd be not so hard to lie. I see those guys every day in the locker room, and it's not so long ago I was part of that life myself.

But I'd rather just be quiet and have people leave me alone. Nobody around me really wants to know, or seems to care, what I do with my non-football time. Charm just wants me to go to strip clubs with him. My parents want me to find a nice tigress and settle down. Gerrard couldn't care less as long as I can play. And Fisher... I don't know what Fisher wants. The only one who knows what I want and cares is up in Hilltown. I

want to call him, but I know he's working hard all week.

I play three games and then Lee calls. I feel better just talking to him, and he seems to know that I don't want to talk about this whole deal. It's only toward the end of the conversation that he says, "So how are you?"

"Weren't we just talking about that?"

He chuckles. "I guess I meant, how are you doing?"

"I know." I lean back on the couch. "I just don't know what to do except what I've been doing."

"Seems to've worked so far." He says it with a kind of resignation.

I want him beside me so badly I can feel it, an empty space in the crook of my arm. "It won't get any worse, will it?" He doesn't answer. "Lee?"

"I'll do what I can."

I rub the sofa fabric. "What do you mean?"

"As much as I can help."

"Don't call Brian."

Another pause. "That's about the only thing I can think of to do to help. What else is there?"

I squeeze the couch cushion. "Be in Aventira Saturday night when we get in."

"Of course."

"And..."

It's my turn to pause, until he says, "Dev?"

I'm staring at the animation of the video game, the players running in place over and over again. "What should I do? Just... do nothing?"

"Why you asking me?"

"You're the smart one, doc." On the screen a player in a non-descript black uniform with the number 54 intercepts a pass and runs off to the right.

"Mmm." He types on the keyboard a little more. "It's your life, though."

A player in a red number 21 runs through tacklers. I watch a quarterback drop back to pass. Number 54 comes back onto the screen. I let Lee's words trickle into my consciousness and settle there. It's just what I've been thinking, isn't it? It's my life and nobody else's business. But coming from him, it sounds wrong. I know better than to try to work it out in my head when I've got him on the phone. "Is it?"

He laughs. "Okay, technically, after the contract you signed, ten percent of it is Ogleby's and a big chunk of it is Chevali's."

I take a breath. "I mean, is it just my life? Or is it..." I have the feeling of plunging into the midst of a play I haven't studied or figured out, bodies flying around me, trusting to luck and my instincts. "Is it our life?"

The typing stops. Very softly, I hear an exhalation into the receiver. "Stud," he whispers, "you got a way of makin' a guy wish he could crawl through telephone lines."

I let my own breath out. "Phones don't have lines anymore. It's all radio signals."

"Radio signals don't work for the imagery. Don't you read anything but video game manuals?"

On the screen, instructions flash on how to play the game with two people. "It's okay, then, me saying that?"

"Yeah. It's okay."

For a moment, it feels like he really did climb through the telephone lines. "Good. So what should I do?"

He snorts, still sounding a bit emotional. "Did you just say the most romantic thing you've ever said to me simply to get me to give you advice?"

"Nah." I stretch out on the couch and flip the video game off. "Though I do think it's a little surprising that you wouldn't just tell me what to do."

"I never tell you what to do."

I grin. "No, you just make it impossible for me to do anything else." He sighs, and my grin slips away. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." It's quick, insincere.

"Bullshit."

"Really, it's — "

"Don't lie to me."

He starts to say something indignant, then cuts himself off. "Shit. I really don't want to do this over the phone."

My paw tightens around the phone. I press it closer to my ear. "Do what?"

"Can you trust me if I say that I need to tell you something Saturday? Will you promise not to worry about what it is?"

"No." I sit back up.

"Can you wait 'til Saturday anyway?"

"No."

"Please, Dev. Trust me."

I crouch forward, tensing. "Is it about Brian?"

"Saturday."

"Well, shit. Why did you even mention it if you aren't going to tell me?"

He sounds genuinely baffled. "I don't know. I couldn't help it."

I growl. "I could be on a flight tonight."

"Don't miss practice."

"*You* could be on a flight tonight."

"Dev, just... Saturday's not so far away."

That pleading note doesn't get into his voice very often, not my confident, assured fox. Even though all the closeness of our moment feels sour, I can't say no. "You promise it's nothing bad?"

His claws tap the table. Not the keyboard, not typing, just nervously tapping. "No. But I promise it won't get worse between now and then. And I promise... I promise I've told you as much of the truth as I could. I'll tell you all of it Saturday night."

I extend my claws and tap the coffee table in rhythm with him. "You're not helping me focus on football."

It works to break the tension. His claws stop their tapping. "Then focus on this: you know how hot you are as a starting linebacker? Don't lose that job."

"Can I picture you watching me from the stands?"

His voice gets lower, more sultry, not quite his husky Lauren Bacollie, but close. "You mean you don't?"

I don't know how to feel, hanging up. All my questions about him come back, like players dancing around before the snap to disguise the play they're going to run. I try to see through the questions to the core of things, the way I'd focus on the key players to figure out the play, but all I can come up with is one big question for myself: do I trust my fox or not?

The only way I can get to sleep is to decide that I do. So I do.

I resist the temptation to check the Internet the next morning. I grab breakfast and head right into practice. I get to the parking lot at the same time as Brick. "Hey!" I call, but he ignores me and waddles quickly in ahead of me. For a bear, he gets in there pretty fast. I could've caught him, but I know why he's moving fast and I don't feel like having a

confrontation.

But when I get into the locker room, I kinda wish I had. Most of the offensive line are getting dressed together to one side. As I come in, they all stop talking and look at me. I look back, calm as I can, but I feel the thunderclouds again, the sense of standing all alone on the plain watching them come in. I expect Coach to call me in to his office again, but the only time I see him that day is a couple times when he comes out to work with the position coaches.

It's our afternoon to watch film. The defensive unit sits together in a session conducted by the defensive coordinator, with Steez and the other defensive position coaches helping out. It almost seems normal, without the offensive line giving me the cold shoulder. We study the film of Aventira over and over again, until we're able to pick out the patterns and the players. Gerrard, Carson, and I spend some time talking about the film afterwards, breaking down our plays and responses with Steez.

By the time that's over, we're all ready for dinner. Gerrard and Carson invite me to dinner at the Bar-None, Gerrard's favorite steak house. I glance at my missed calls first. None of them are from Lee, so I put the cell phone away and follow them to the restaurant.

I've only been there once. It doesn't have fancy decor, just plain white stucco and dark wood beams inside. "On me," Gerrard says as we all sit down. "But no eating competitions this time."

"I'd eat you guys under the table anyway," I say, glancing at the menu out of habit more than anything else. At the top, it says, "No Frills. Just Great Steak."

Carson raises an eyebrow. His ear flicks back, and he hides his grin behind his own menu.

We order — steaks and baked potatoes all around, with some imported beer that Gerrard likes. Once the waiter leaves, Gerrard and Carson look at each other, then at me.

"Shit," I say, looking from one to the other. "Can we not talk about this?"

"I'd like that," Gerrard says, "but you saw the O-line in the locker room today and on the field. It's starting to affect practice, and that means Coach is worried about it. I said I'd talk to you."

I fold my arms, lean back, and stare at him. "Fine. So?"

"So I don't care." The coyote points at me. "You can play. Some of the

other guys are getting all wound up about it."

"That's not my problem."

He shakes his head. "Not saying they're right. It pisses me off. But you need to do something, then we'll deal with them."

I tilt my muzzle. "What do you mean?"

"You need to commit yourself," he says. "Don't just sit and wait to see what develops. Take control."

"It's none of anybody's fucking business one way or another," I say.

Carson rumbles, in annoyance or agreement. Gerrard acknowledges him with a dip of his muzzle. "This Internet guy has made it someone else's business, and your agent hasn't helped. Look, I'm not asking you to tell me one way or the other. I'm asking you to tell the team that it isn't true. Whether it is or not, that'll settle it the fastest."

"Why don't you just tell them that?"

Gerrard grins a coyote grin, patronizing and sympathetic all at once. "It's gotta come from you, pal. You can't let other people fight your battles."

I stare down at the table, picking at the cloth with a claw. I can feel Carson's stare. "Okay."

They both relax. "Good," Gerrard says.

Carson gets up and heads for the bathroom. I watch him cross the room and turn to see Gerrard's eyes on me. His expression is hard to read, even with those huge expressive canid ears. Maybe it's the ears that remind me of Lee, or maybe it's the long muzzle, but I find myself talking again. "You know, even if it's not true for me... it's gotta be true for someone in the league somewhere."

"Ayup," Gerrard says with a nod, remaining noncommittal.

"How do you think that guy's teammates would react?" I try to stay casual.

The coyote's posture echoes my nonchalance, all except for his focused ears. "Depends on the team, depends on the guy, depends on the coach."

"You think it could have a happy ending?"

"Probably not the first time." Watching my expression, he leans forward. "It's gonna happen sooner or later," he says. "But for my money, I'd be happy if it never happened."

That shocks me a little. Gerrard never seemed concerned enough to

have that strong an opinion on the matter. "Why?"

"Because it's got nothin' to do with football." His eyes light up, his fingers curl and flex. "If everyone just left their life at the door and got on with the game, we'd all be better off. All this crap about having cubs and cheating on wives—who gives a crap? Can you play the game or not?"

"So, like, a murder investigation?"

He gives me one of those "don't be an idiot" looks. "I'm not talking about crime. I'm talking about whether you go to church, whether you're faithful to your wife, whether you're sleeping with a Hollywood chick, whether you gave money to this or that charity or sucked up to the media or went on "Doing The Macarena With The Stars." None of that has one bit to do with how you perform when you get out on that field, and it should get exactly that much attention."

Carson slides back easily into his seat and rolls his eyes. "Give it a rest," he grumbles.

Gerrard points at him. "That's why we get along. Respect on the field. Nothing else."

"How's my respect doing?" I ask.

Carson grins. Gerrard's grin unfolds more slowly, stretching back to the corners of his muzzle and showing some teeth. "Getting there," he says.

The steak is as good as advertised. Conversation pretty much comes to a dead stop once it arrives, and once it's gone, we're too full to talk much. Gerrard says, making a point, that it's because they focus on steak and nothing else. I have to admit, walking out feeling ten pounds heavier, that I see his perspective.

The next day is even more frustrating. For the first time, I catch a pointed remark about "normal" people, whispered just loud enough for me to overhear as I walk by. It takes a lot of restraint to ignore it. If it came out in the normal locker room way, boisterous teasing and over-the-top remarks — in other words, from Charm — it'd be no sweat to deal with. When I catch another remark about perversion, at the end of the day, I ask Coach if I can have a word in his office.

He starts the conversation. "Thought about what I said?"

I nod and take a breath. "Gerrard thinks I should just meet with the team and deny the rumors."

"You going to?"

"I guess so. I can't think of what else to do. I can't take — this is

getting bad for the team. They're talking behind my back and saying stuff so I can hear it, now."

He raises an eyebrow. "No fighting."

"No, I haven't started anything." I wonder then if he was commenting that there hadn't been fighting rather than telling me not to. "Uh, I'm just trying to ignore 'em."

He leans forward. "You shouldn't be talking to the team. I should. Now, you tell me this isn't true, and I believe you. But I want you and Fisher to go out tonight and think about how you're gonna handle this moving forward."

I blink. "Why Fisher?"

"Cause he's been around a long time and because you two are friends." When I don't respond to that, he adds, "and because I said so."

"I'm supposed to have dinner with Carroll tonight," I say. She's already called, in fact, and is waiting for me at the Xeric Lounge.

Coach barks a short laugh. "Bring her along tomorrow."

I scowl, not quite sure if he's joking. "She's only in town for the night."

He picks up a pencil that's almost been chewed in half. "Yeah, yeah. Get the hell out of my office. I got a game to prepare for."

To my surprise, Fisher doesn't put up any resistance to the idea. We walk out to the parking lot in an uneasy silence, until I head toward my car and say, "See you after dinner."

"Can you keep the dinner short?" Fisher says.

"Why don't you just come along?" I beep my car open and turn to look at him. "Not like we've got anything intimate to discuss."

He tilts his head. "She knows too?"

I nod. "Well, kinda. I was gonna tell her everything tonight."

He takes out his cell phone. "Let me call Gena."

"Tell her you're meeting a young, hot panther for dinner."

He snorts, but gives me the faintest ghost of a grin. I pull the door open and get into the car, staring up as Fisher walks across the lot to his car. I wait 'til he gives me the thumbs-up to pull out.

At the restaurant, Carroll's in the bar, nursing something dark and bubbly with a cherry in it. "Double your pleasure," she says. "Who's the other hunk?"

"Fisher Kingston." He extends a paw, which she takes daintily. "Heard a lot about ya."

She flicks an ear and looks at me. "Dev talks about me?"

"Star Today," he says, looking down. "Uh, the wife gets it."

Caroll laughs. "Was that the issue with my temper tantrum on the Bad Medicine 3 set, or my affair with Jake on Panther House?"

Fisher mumbles something I don't hear, but it makes Caroll laugh again. "Come on," she says. "They're holding a table for us."

"For two or for three?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter," she calls back airily, putting on a winning smile for the host.

Five minutes later, seated around a secluded table for four, I look around nervously. She's staring at me and Fisher is looking anywhere but. I'd thought it would be easier with him there, but he's actually making it harder. "So, ah, this S.O. of mine, you remember?" She nods. I take a breath. "Well, the reason Ogleby didn't think she'd be suitable for me to be seen with," and I try not to emphasize Ogleby's name too hard as I look at Fisher, "is that she's, uh, a fox."

Caroll nods. "And what else?"

"And she's... not a she."

"Not usually," Fisher mumbles under his breath.

We both stare at him, and then Caroll gives me a questioning look. I say, "Oh, there was an incident..."

She shakes her head. "Tell me later." One paw rubs her whiskers. "Actually, I sort of suspected."

I fold my arms. "Oh?"

She shrugs. "You don't swish or anything. But remember when I said about how all those other guys would give their left nut to be set up on a date with me, and you were all like, 'whatever'? And even Colin, Colin of 'Colin and Penny sittin' in a tree' ever since high school, Colin who looked so disapproving that his teammates hired escorts, even *he* was flirting with me. You just seemed to have zero interest."

"And with her," Fisher puts in, "that'd be a dead giveaway."

"I bet you haven't been talking about how hot I am with your teammates, either." She's chiding me, like I forgot to hold a door for her or something.

I feel all hot and my fur gets prickly. "I should do that, huh?"

"Hell, yes," Fisher snorts. "You should talk about her like you've done her. Take a page from Charm."

"Yeah," Carroll nods. "Talk about my tits." She leans back so her chest sticks out over the table. "They're pretty nice, I'm told."

"Not bad," Fisher says.

"You're married," I remind him.

"And straight," he says. "I notice tits. You should too, from now on."

"So now I have to be Charm," I growl.

Fisher takes a swig of beer and burps. "Ever hear anyone doubt that he's straight?"

I roll my eyes. "Fine."

Carroll tugs at the top of her dress. "You wanna see 'em? I think you should."

"What, now?" I look around the restaurant. Nobody's looking our way, but if she takes her dress down, they sure as hell will.

"Nah, back in the restrooms." She puts her paws back on the table and scowls. "I'm not that desperate for attention."

"Is our reporter still outside?"

"My flea called him. I hope so."

"Hey," Fisher says. "You should get caught groping her in the restroom. Like that actor guy with the prostitute."

"Ha ha." I look at Carroll for confirmation that it's a ridiculous idea. She's looking thoughtful. "No," I say. "Flat out no."

Fisher shrugs and leans back. "Thought you were committed."

"I don't know if that'd be right for my image, though," Carroll says. "I mean, I want to be desirable, not tawdry. Bathroom groping is one step away from frolicking nude in hot tubs, and then before you know it you're being linked to, like, hockey players."

"See? She doesn't want to do it."

Fisher spreads his paws. "Just an idea," he says. "You don't have to listen to my ideas."

I sink back in my chair. "So what am I gonna say to the guys?"

We kick around a lot of ideas, before, during, and after the dinner. When we've got the text settled out, Carroll brings up another point. "What are you going to tell your fox? Last thing we need is for him to get pissed off and run to the papers too. I bet he has better pictures."

My phone is a warm weight in my pocket. "He already knows I need to do something like that. I'll talk to him later tonight, or tomorrow. He's got something to tell me, too."

Caroll has a little habit of dragging one fingerpad down her lower lip when she's thinking. It registers with me that it's kind of sexy, but Fisher's eyes go slightly wide and he looks away quickly when she does it. "Hey," she says, "what if he was the one who wrote that story? Maybe he's tired of sneaking around."

I laugh. "That's ridiculous."

"Well, either way, he wins." She brushes her whiskers back with the damp finger, grooming. Fisher, who'd just looked back at her, coughs and holds up the dessert menu to block his view of her. I think she's teasing him. "If you get kicked out of the league, no more sneaking around. If you're out and accepted, no more sneaking around. The only way he doesn't win is if you deny everything and the story goes away."

"He didn't have anything to do with it," I say. "It's this other guy, Brian, who has it out for me because he hates all football players now."

"Oh, well. It'd be a great movie plot, though," she says. "You should write it up. I'll show it to my agent."

"It was your idea," I point out.

Fisher lowers the menu cautiously, then all the way when he sees Caroll isn't licking her fingers any more. "Whoever did it, Dev, the only thing you can do is deny it."

It's the right thing to do, I tell myself on the way home. I send Lee a quick text to see if he's still up, but he doesn't respond, so I sort through things on my own. I feel a sense of relief that if I can just get through the meeting tomorrow, Coach and Fisher and Gerrard will back me up and we can get back to the business of winning football games. Because the funny thing is, my play on the field is the one place where I am getting more and more confident. If all this off-field stuff would just go away (not Lee; I mean Brian), I'd be in a great place.

At noon, Coach gets everyone together in the locker room before lunch, because there's always a couple reporters hanging out on the field. We're all panting and winded from practice. Most guys are gulping drinks. Coach surveys the team, and raises his paws for quiet. I feel my stomach churn. I'd always felt like a part of this team until the last few days, and this meeting just makes that separation more stark.

"There's been some stuff floating around lately about one of our players." Coach dives right in. "I know most of you know better than to listen to anything in the media. Those guys would make up stories about

their mothers to sell papers, and the Internet ain't any better. They're just lookin' for attention now, selling themselves. So I want to make sure you guys all know that if you hear anything about anyone on the team, you come talk to me or talk to them."

I'm feeling really flush. I think for a minute maybe it was the practice, but I realize it's Coach's words that are doing it. It's just like one of my dreams, because I know everyone's looking at me even if I can't catch anyone doing it. They know Coach is lying on my behalf, only he's not lying, he's telling what he thinks is the truth because I lied to him. I feel my paws clench again as the muzzle of a spotted skunk appears in my mind. I miss the rest of Coach's talk, until he finishes up with a curt, "Everyone got that?"

The offensive line is looking at nothing in particular, definitely not me. Coach barks, louder, "Got that?"

"Yes, Coach," everyone murmurs.

"All right, then."

It's in the showers after that day's practice that I realize that Coach's speech only helped a little bit. None of the offensive line guys showered with us, and neither did some other players, including Colin. When I come out, they're all hanging out in front of their lockers, chatting as though they just got caught up in conversation. They don't look at me or anything, but I've only been at my locker for a couple minutes before they all head in.

Fisher, behind me, says, "There's always gonna be a few."

"That how it started with Tony?"

He doesn't answer right away. I pull on my shirt, he pulls on a pair of pants. "About that..."

"It's okay, Fish," I start, but he waves me quiet.

"You got a right to know. I was a dumb kid, comin' outta college. Tony was a big doof. The other guys picked on him and I wanted t'get in good with 'em, so I did too. I ain't prouda that." He looks at me, steady. "It wasn't about him. I promise you that. It coulda been anyone or anything. I just wanted to fit in, so I rode the guy who was different same as everyone else did."

"Jeez, Fish." I sit down to pull on my pants.

"I told you, I ain't proud. But I..." He grimaces. "Guys aren't s'posed to talk about this shit."

"Once in a while don't hurt."

"Heh." He leans against the locker. "Well, seein' you and him, and 'specially how you talk about him... made me think about Tony again. Made me wish I could call him up, say I'm sorry."

I nod. "I didn't know he'd died."

"He ain't dead. I just don't know where he is, and he sure's hell wouldn't take my call. So you want me to talk to the team?"

I shake my head. "If Coach couldn't change 'em, what are you gonna do?"

"I know how to shake 'em up like he ain't allowed to."

I lean against the locker and watch him pull his shirt on. "I don't want to shake anyone up

I told ya, I'll do it."

"I don't want anyone shook up. Look, all they're doing is avoiding me in the shower. I can live with that."

Fisher gives me a steady look. "What if it gets worse?"

Colin's just coming out of the shower. I don't look at him. "I'll deal with it then."

I feel all brave when I say it, less so when I get home with a large pizza. Because of course, I've forgotten that things will always get worse. Lee's the one who tells me. He's the only one I've stayed in touch with over the last few days, because I don't feel up to Ogleby or my parents. And when I get on the phone with him, the tone of his voice makes me stop chewing.

"You haven't seen it, have you? Nobody at the team said anything?"

"No." I think back to when Fisher and I left. "Coach had someone in his office, a raccoon from the front office, I think. But he has people down there every now and then. And he saw me go." I put down the slice of pizza. "What'd he do now?"

Lee takes a breath. "The story lost steam yesterday. He must not have been getting enough attention. I guess he's been thinking about this a lot."

"Of course he has. It's his fifteen seconds of fame."

"Fifteen minutes."

"Whatever. What did he do?"

He's tapping the table again. "Another blog entry. He says that you contacted him after the last one."

I can't come up with any words. I'm trying to make a sound, but my throat seems to have closed up. Lee says, "You didn't, did you?"

"No!" It explodes out of me as I jump to my feet. "Christ, what do you think... how would I... I don't even have..."

"Settle down," he says. "I didn't think you did."

"What am I supposed to have said?" I pace back and forth, looking out of the window. "And what else do you know? Is what you're going to tell me part of all this somehow?"

"Let me talk," he says.

I can't stop the growling, but I can at least stop the words from coming. "All right. Go."

"He says you offered to blow him."

"*What?*" I stand stock-still. I'm imagining my teammates reading the blog, my friends, my parents.

Lee's staying calm on the other end of the call. "It's a lie, of course it is. The people in the comments are already kinda calling bullshit on him."

"But it's still out there! People are reading it!"

"I sent a message to the site admin. I hope we can get it taken down."

I stare out the window into the fading light. "But it's still up now?"

"Yeah."

"Fucking hell." I kick the sofa and march into the bedroom. "Did anyone else pick it up yet? How does that work?"

"It's only been up for a bit." He doesn't sound particularly hopeful.

"Lion Christ, Lee, what do I do?"

"If I don't hear from them in the next hour, I'll call."

"And what if it doesn't come down? What if the other blogs pick it up? What if the *networks* pick it up?"

"Stay calm. He wants to rile you up."

"It's working," I snarl.

"I know it's working," he says. "That's why I'm trying to get you to settle down."

I breathe. I go to the window and press my paw against it, staring into the evening without seeing anything. "All right," I say finally. "I'm calm."

"Don't say anything publicly," he says. "Just ignore him. Did you talk to the team?"

"Coach did." I tell him about it.

"All right." He taps the table again. "I'm gonna call Brian. I'll try to get him to take it down."

Now I look at the houses spread out beneath me. I wish I knew where

Brian lives. "Tell him if it's still up tomorrow morning, I'll be at his front door to be more persuasive."

"I have a better idea. Why don't you come to my front door?"

"If I could, foxy," I say.

He hangs up to call Brian, and I pace back and forth. I want to believe this will all blow over, that my life will go back to being simple and normal, but I don't feel it. The light outside has faded quickly to darkness, so that when I look at the window again, there's a tiger staring back at me. He doesn't think this will go away soon, either.

Thursday is no worse than Wednesday, except that Lee hasn't called me back by the time we start practice, so I have to wait until lunch to check my phone. He's left me a voicemail, sounding tired. "The site admin said he'd look into it." Nothing about whether it got picked up elsewhere, but as it turns out, he didn't need to tell me. As I flip the phone closed, Coach calls my name. Barks it, more like. His ears are flat and his eyes narrow.

"We're focusing on preparing for Aventira until Sunday," he says. "After that I'll see you in my office."

"Yes, sir," I say to his retreating tail. Steez hasn't said anything to me beyond our normal practice talk, and neither has Gerrard. But I notice that there's still a bunch of guys who won't shower with me. Maybe more than yesterday.

Lee doesn't answer his phone Thursday night. Or Friday morning. I know that he hasn't abandoned me, but it's hard to convince myself to feel that. My mood leads to slipping up in practice, until Steez yells at me, and then I focus again.

By the end of the day, I'm exhausted and my black mood hasn't worked itself out. I feel like I can't keep this up any more, and if I'm not going to be part of the team, then fuck it, I should just quit this whole thing. That comes into sharp focus as I walk in to shower. In my mind, I see the guys waiting for me to be done, silent and judging.

I happen to be passing Colin on the way in. He isn't walking with anyone, but he doesn't turn to talk to me. Fuck him. I say, "You can tell Brick and the others to go ahead and shower."

He snaps his head around, then his ears fold back as if I'd said something distasteful. "Uh, what?"

I wave a paw at him and head to my locker. "I'm gonna make a phone call or something. You go take your shower. I'll wait 'til all you assholes

are done."

"Hey," he says, "if you're refusing to face the consequences of your behavior, that's your problem, but don't take it out on me."

"The consequences..." I turn and step in toward him. He's almost as tall as I am, but I outweigh him. Considerably. "What behavior are you talking about?"

He straightens up. "I think you know."

"Tackling running backs? Intercepting passes? Running shuttle sprints?"

His eyes narrow and his ears flatten further. I catch a scent of anger from him, with a surprising undertone of fear. "You may think it's a joking matter, but your soul is going to suffer for it."

"Don't worry about my soul," I say. "It's tough."

A little crowd has gathered around us, among them Ty, Brick and Gerrard. "Hey," Ty says, "Lay off him."

We both look to see who he's talking to. He's staring at Colin. The two foxes glare at each other. "Did you even see what was on the blogs yesterday?" Colin says, finally.

Ty throws up his paws. "Who cares? You got shit written about you, too."

Colin takes a second to process that. I remember now, Penny talking at the dinner about the things "those writers" had written about Colin taking money. Colin jabs a finger at the other fox's chest. "That was different."

"How?" I step to one side, so I can get between them if there's a fight. Carson, on the other side, does the same.

"Because all that was was about money," he says, half-turning to face me. "It's just some stupid rule that colleges made up to screw the student athletes."

His eyes are wide, nostrils flared. Ty and I come to the same realization a second apart.

"Oh my God," he says.

"You *did* take the money," I echo.

"Hypocrite." Ty folds his arms.

Colin opens his mouth to defend himself, but I get my words out first. "No, it makes perfect sense," I say. "What they wrote about him was true, so he believes whatever he reads."

"I don't hear you denying it," he says.

By this time, a good chunk of the team and several of the coaches are clustered around, listening. Strangely, the fact that Colin is on the spot with me makes me feel better, even if I kind of despise him right now.

"I haven't read the whole thing that was posted yesterday," I say, "but I absolutely did not call Brian or threaten him or offer to do anything to him."

"So ya know him." That's Brick.

"Met him a couple times," I say. "Let me tell you, I never had the urge to put his dick in my mouth or anywhere else."

Colin folds his arms. "Why would he lie?"

"Why would you take money illegally?" His eyes narrow further. "Because he got something from it. He wants attention."

"So he jus' made the whole thing up?" Brick, again. "That other stuff, you and that fox, and Fish?"

Colin's watching me, a team full of eyes behind him. I look across them and see Fisher, near the back. He shakes his head, minutely, just enough to let me know he'll back me, whatever I say. I take a deep breath to say, yeah, he made the whole thing up. But I can't look away from Fisher, and I can't stop thinking about Lee.

Our life together. For him, for Colin, maybe it's not that hard to hide the parts you're ashamed of, the parts you don't want people to see. But for me, the people I'm close to, I have a hard time keeping parts of my life away from them. I've almost come out to my parents a dozen times, and I only see them on holidays. If I lie to the team now, it just increases that separation I've been feeling. In a way, Brian's made-up story has given me a chance to take the high road.

Colin says, "Well?" I look at Fisher again, raise my eyebrows slightly in a question. A couple of the guys look back at him.

"Fish," Brick rumbles. "'Zit true?"

Fisher looks at me, only at me. I can't tell from here what his expression means. But it's not his decision to make, it's mine. I'm sure he'd lie for me if I didn't say anything.

"It's true," I say.

All the eyes come back to me, like I'm staring across at the biggest offensive line in history. "I didn't want it to come out. Not really anyone else's business. But this guy, Brian, he has a grudge against me. I wasn't good enough at keeping it secret." I look around at the interest,

disapproval, flattened and perked ears, narrowed and wide eyes, nostrils flaring. Nobody's taken a step back yet. "Trust me," I say, "I don't give a shit what the rest of you do on your time off, and I sure as hell hoped you didn't care what I did. I leave it all out on the field, like we all do."

"Hear, hear," Gerrard says.

"Pretty speech." Brick rumbles. "I don't want you checkin' me out in the shower."

"Hell, Brick," Charm booms from his locker. He towers over the crowd, his wide grin bright white. "I do that m'self."

A couple guys chuckle. Brick squints. "Figures," he says. "Roommate."

Charm shrugs. "Gramps is too flat. I like your tits, though."

More chuckles. Colin glares in their direction. "This isn't funny," he says. "Sodomy is no joke."

"Listen," Gerrard says. "Dev's gonna keep his life to himself. Might be a good idea if you do the same. When we're in this room, we're a football team."

"Hear, hear." In a near-perfect imitation of Gerrard's words, Coach Samuelson steps past the coyote and through the crowd. He glances at Gerrard as he passes. "You wanna coach this team?"

The players make way for him. He faces me. "My office, five minutes."

"Yes, sir."

To the rest of the team he says, "Marvel's got it dead on. In this building, out on that field, we are a team. We have to be able to trust each other out there." He points the other way, to the exit. "Out there, I don't care. But I'll tell you, I've played on a couple championship teams, and what they had in common was a group of guys who believed in themselves, believed in each other, and played together, as a team. I've told you that before, but you haven't been tested. This'll show what kind of character you have." He crooks a finger at me. "Now, the rest of you, hit the showers. See you in a couple hours at the airport."

He closes the office door behind me. I fidget as he stares at me without saying anything. Finally, he shakes his head. "Fuckin' hell, Miski, I am runnin' out of linebackers."

"Yes, sir." My heart sinks.

He chews on a pencil. "I don't like it that you lied to me, but I get why.

Better not happen again. What I need to know is: Can you play Sunday?"

"Hell, yes!" It explodes out of me. I hadn't realized until I feel the wash of relief how deeply I'd been sure that that scene was the end of my career, or at least the end of my starting gig.

Coach grins, the first time I've seen a real grin from him this week. "Hell, yes you can," he says. "We'll deal with this other crap after the game."

It feels more like a stay of execution than a reprieve, but I'll take it. I want to kiss him, but that probably wouldn't be the greatest idea. Still, I feel terrific until I get in my SUV and wonder exactly what Coach meant by "deal with this other crap."

"Probably," Lee says, sensibly, when I call him, "he means, "deal with this other crap.""

"Thanks," I say.

"Any other reaction from the team?"

"Not really." I keep my speed down on the surface streets now, with an eye out for cops. "They were mostly gone when I left, except for Fisher."

"He's still feeling guilty," Lee says. "Oh, that reminds me. Guess who else was on that team with Calhoun."

"Huh? Someone I know?"

"Samuelson."

"Coach?" It seems bizarre, but then I remember the way he looked at me, making me feel like I was an old problem come back again. I think about how hard he hit the point that playing the game was all that mattered to him. I try not to think about his "livestock" comment. "Jesus, that figures."

"Did he say something?"

"Nah, just the way he acted. I think he knew about Fisher, too." I tell him Fish's confession, briefly. "So where have you been? Or is this one of the things you'll tell me tomorrow?"

"Just working," he says. "I talked to Brian. He's not going to take it down. The site admins aren't moving fast on it either. I don't think anything's going to happen."

"Fucking piece of shit."

"Quite." He coughs. "On the positive side, it doesn't look like the post is getting much traction anywhere else that I can see. It's hit a couple other

sports blogs. Your old roommate piped up on your behalf to testify that you're straight as an arrow. Some random guy claims he saw you going into a hotel with a male prostitute, but someone else pointed out that you played in a preseason game on the other side of the country later that day and that it probably wasn't you. Also, uh, someone quoted a maid from a hotel who says she saw a naked male fox in a room where a tiger was staying at the combine a couple years ago."

"That could be anyone!" He doesn't say anything. "Lee?"

"You're right," he says. "It could be anyone, so it doesn't matter who it was, right?"

I shake my head even though he can't see me. "You owe me a story, mister."

I keep talking to him all the way home, about how the team will react, how I should act, and so on. He thinks I'll be able to keep playing as long as it doesn't make it out into the mainstream media. I'm not so sure, but I am pretty motivated to prove my case on Sunday. What it all comes down to, as far as the coaches and Gerrard are concerned, is whether I can play. If I haven't proven that in six weeks when Corey comes back from his goring, I'll be benched, and then traded, if not outright cut. After we hang up, I look down and realize I'm going fast again. I ease up on the pedal. I feel a lot better knowing he was just working, though I'm not sure what I was thinking he might have been doing. I've got too much stuff I'm trying to keep in my head now to be able to sort that out.

The flight to Aventira that night is an interesting experience. Brick and Colin and their friends do their best to keep their distance without appearing like they're keeping their distance. If I had more energy, I'd walk close to them on purpose just to mess with them. But I'm tired, as most of us are, and I prefer to just slump down in the seat next to Charm.

"Hey," he says, nudging me, "how does a bunny turn on the light after sex?"

I look sideways at him. He's leaning toward me, grinning and eager. "I dunno," I say.

"She opens the car door!" He hoots, and then stops. "Sorry — or *he* opens the car door."

"Charm..."

"No, no," he insists, "it still works, see? Cause the funny part is it's a bunny."

"I get it," I growl.

Now he just looks like he's trying to work out long division in his head. "Are guy bunnies the same as girl bunnies?"

"I don't know."

"You never picked up a bunny?"

I can see the ears in front of us swiveling back. "No." I turn away from him, looking across the aisle at Carson, who's got his iPod in and his eyes closed. On the charter flight, they don't make us turn off our electronics during takeoff.

Charm doesn't need to see my face to talk to me. "How did you start picking up guys?"

I rummage in my bag for my iPod. "You got any new music?"

"No, really. I mean, did you just wake up one day, and..."

"Shut up!" I snap, loudly enough that the guys who weren't looking at us turn around.

He whuffs. "Jus' wonderin'," he says.

"Talk to me when we get to the room," I mutter. I find the iPod and hold the earbuds in one paw. My ears feel hot enough to melt them. I put them in anyway, turn on something mindless and loud, and close my eyes.

By the time we get to the hotel, of course, Charm's got his mind set on what the best strip clubs in Aventira are. He can't go out Saturday night, the night before a game, so he's got to get his thrills in tonight. I sit in the room and check my messages. Ogleby, passing on more interview requests and telling me that I'm going to need to call a press conference to deny the allegations. My father, telling me he's going to watch Sunday's game with the guys from the shop, so he can show them I'm a real man. Lee, telling me he's working late so he can have tomorrow night free. Telling me he loves me.

I hold on to that last one, but the echoes of the others keep bouncing around as I sit alone in the hotel room that feels too small. I pace back and forth from bed to window to door, unable to shake the feeling that the other guys are talking about me. So I go down to the lobby and pace around there, where it's almost as quiet as my room, so quiet I can hear my claws clicking on the marble with every step. None of the people sitting under the fashionable modern green-shaded lights are on the team; in fact, they all seem to be small species: ferrets and mice, one bobcat typing on a laptop and a rat reading a book.

Some of my teammates are in the bar, sitting back and relaxing. I watch them through the window, half-hidden by a large bush. They're smiling and laughing, drinking beers and pointing at the TV, where there's a basketball game going on. I picture myself walking in and joining them, the smiles fading, the laughter dying out — not completely, because they wouldn't want to make me uncomfortable, but they wouldn't be able not to.

I stick my paws in my pockets. The marble is cold on the top of my tail as I drag it back along the floor of the lobby to the elevators. How much longer will Coach let an outsider, like I've become, stick with the team? I want to call Lee, but the last thing he needs is to hear from me in this state of mind. I can wait until tomorrow night. In the meantime, I try my best to go to sleep, knowing that tomorrow in practice, and Sunday in the game, I'll have football to focus on, with no room for wondering about anything further in the future than the next play. That's the beauty of football: you can be a hero at any moment, but the moments are fleeting, so you have to keep chasing them. It'd be nice if life could be like that, if I could go to sleep knowing that in the morning we'd be starting from scratch, 0-0, a new game or a new season.

That night, I have the dream again, about not being drafted. This time, Lee's not with me on the couch. It's just me, sitting with the certainty gnawing at my insides that my name will never be called by the voices on the TV. I don't know where Lee is, in the dream. In the twisted consistent logic of the dream world, he never even enters my mind. The dream keeps a long, torturous grip on me: for some reason, partway through, the media arrive. Frank Evien, an ESPN reporter, starts to report on me as though it's a live show. I wake up before he can mention that I'm naked.

For a moment I lie there, still in the world of the dream, head buzzing with it. The room is dark, I tell myself. Frank is not standing here telling the world how sad it is that the naked gay tiger will not get to play in the UFL. I have a practice to go to, and a game to play in, and as far as I know, my name is still in the starting lineup. On the other paw, I did just come out to all my teammates yesterday, a decision that in the cold isolation of morning seems downright moronic.

Charm snores across from me. I take heart in his boyish curiosity, as clumsy as it was. He doesn't hate me. Neither does Fisher. I build a ladder out of the names I can add to that list, until I can pull myself out of bed.

Charm and I get breakfast in the room, two huge bowls of oatmeal for

him, a stack of sausages and eggs for me. Normally, I just pick up the sausages and eat 'em in two bites. This morning, every time I do that, his grin gets bigger and wider, until I glare at him and start cutting them up.

"Hey," he says, as though it's just occurred to him, "how do you just wake up one day and decide you like dick?"

I would love to continue to avoid the question, but I hear Lee in my head saying the best way to get people on your side is to be open and frank. So I say, "It wasn't like that. It's just this one guy."

"Whoo!" he says, and punches me in the shoulder hard enough to bruise it. "Gramps has a steady boyfriend!"

Christ, I don't know what to do with that. It makes me cringe, it makes me happy. I want to snap in his face and I want to laugh and punch him back and part of me wants to hug him for being so normal, so blase, so Charm-ing about it. I mutter, "Yeah."

He hoots some more. "Whatever cranks your motor, Gramps. Me, I love a good pair of titties. Can't get up without that, you know?"

"Yeah," I say, "I know. You only told me every other night."

He shovels down a mouthful of oatmeal. "You get off on looking at dicks?"

"Not yours, if that's what you're worried about."

He shrugs. "You ain't the only guy I caught staring in the shower."

I stop with a forkful of eggs halfway to my muzzle. "On this team?"

He nods, stacking the second bowl of oatmeal in the empty first one. "Ain't sayin' who."

"No, course not." I don't press, but I wonder, now, if there is someone else on the team who's gay. Lee would tell me that statistically it is likely. There are a bunch of guys I don't know so well. Maybe if things go okay for me...

For the rest of breakfast, I imagine myself as some kind of hero for gay athletes. I come crashing back to earth as practice starts, when everything's the same as the previous day. Nobody else comes out, the guys who were avoiding me still avoid me, the guys who just care about whether I can play yell at me when I take my mind off the game. During the afternoon session, Steez walks us one last rime through the plays we're expecting to see from Aventira and how we respond to them. Nobody mentions the fact that I have a boyfriend or that I like dick (at least, I like his).

Then it's time for the showers, again. I head for my locker and then, feeling eyes on me from around the room, swerve over to Gerrard's. "Hey," I say, loudly enough for the whole room to hear, "I'm going to go over the playbook one more time for about twenty minutes. I'll shower after."

The coyote seems surprised, but says only, "Sounds good," and strips his shirt off. I walk back out of the locker room with the playbook and grab a seat on the bench. I'm just flipping through the first plays when I hear

Charm's booming voice. "Hey, that sounds like a good idea. I'm gonna go wait with Gramps. I mean, study."

Clomping hooves echo through the tunnel. The bench lets out a creak as he sits next to me. I raise an eyebrow. "What plays do you have to study? You come out, you line up, you kick the ball."

He grins. "Well," he says, "I just didn't want'cha to have nothin' to look at in the shower."

"Room for one more?"

I turn and see Fisher, holding his playbook, standing on my other side. "It's a long bench," I say.

He sits on my other side, holding the playbook closed in his lap. Charm leans across to see him. "Hey, Fish. Solid." He holds out a fist to bump.

Fisher doesn't look at it. "Takes an old man rime to do the right thing," he says.

Charm withdraws his fist. "You ain't that old."

I look back toward the locker room. "How long is this gonna last?"

"Long as you keep playin'," Charm says.

Gerrard and Carson come out of the locker room. They look at the three of us, at the open playbook in my lap. Gerrard sits cross-legged on the ground in front of me and opens his book. "What play were you at?" he says.

"Dippin Dots 88," I say. Carson nods, sits next to Gerrard, and opens his own book.

Lee thinks this is a good sign. He tells me this later, after he greets me wearing nothing but a smile and some kind of scent that yanks me into his hotel room as forcefully as if he'd grabbed me by the paw. "Funny," I breathe, crushing him to me and sliding my paws down the right hard curves of his back, "I look at naked foxes every day and nothing. One glance at you and I'm sporting more wood than This Old House."

He laughs and rubs his own against me. "I'll take that as a compliment," he murmurs, his paws looking for the proof of my words and finding it quickly.

"You must have something pretty bad to tell me." I'm half-joking. I slide my own paw around to his front, curling fingers around the familiar heft of his sheath. He's as hard as I am, if not harder.

He's already undoing my pants. "You want to hear it now, or after?"

By way of answer, I push down on his shoulders. He chuckles and takes my pants with him as he drops to his knees, rubbing the soft fur of his muzzle against my erection. I brace myself against the wall when he starts using his tongue. Just watching his naked body on its knees, the tongue washing up me over and over again, would be almost enough to make me come.

But of course, there are other things to consider, like his needs, and my other needs, and the carpeting in the room, so we adjourn to the bed, shedding my clothes along the way. I take him from the top, his muzzle in the pillow, tail between us like a pillow itself. My arms enfold him through both climaxes, squeezing his ribcage. I mouth his ear, coming down, and then brace myself on my elbows so my weight isn't all on him.

"So," he mumbles into the pillow, "you liked that."

"I like *you*," I say.

"Just 'like'?"

I kiss the base of his ear. "Depends what you're going to tell me."

He goes quiet. I nudge his ear. "I was joking," I say.

Slowly, he works his rear free of my erection. I pull back to my knees and he rolls over, looking up at me. "Let me get cleaned up," he says. "Want to shower?"

"After you." Now I'm worrying, wondering what it is. Lee sometimes overthinks things, so he might be making a bigger deal out of it than it needs to be. But he might not.

The shower is strange in those little ways that tell you that you're not at home. The hot water turns on the other way. The shampoo shelf is narrow, and I keep knocking the bottle over with my elbow. The hotel shampoo smells funny. It's not Lee's home, either, I remind myself.

That just makes me think of football games played on a neutral site, so neither side has an advantage. Did he plan to be in an Aventira hotel just so I wouldn't feel at a disadvantage when he tells me whatever it was? No, if

it was a breakup, something bad, if we just had good-bye sex without him telling me, he'd have done that in his apartment, in a safe setting, right? But maybe he didn't want me to have to drive back all those hours to the game after he'd told me his news.

Lion Christ, talk about overdrinking. I squeeze my aching head in my paws and get soap in my eyes. The stinging distracts me, lets me curse at myself. I rinse off quickly.

When I get out of the shower, he's still naked, sitting on the edge of his bed. So I don't put clothes on either, I just sit next to him. "All right," I say. "How bad is it?"

He stares at his knees. "It's about Brian."

I almost say, what, are you leaving me for him? Then I get the bizarre thought that if I say it, it'll become true. I look at the neutral white walls, the bland paintings of landscapes and flowers, the dark wood dresser with the television on top of it. I keep emotion out of my voice. "What about him?"

He sighs. "I've... well... I've been seeing a lot of him this fall. More than I've told you."

I feel cold all through my ribcage, ice creeping toward my heart. "Doing what?"

He shakes his head. "I haven't slept with him."

"That's a relief." I say it with some sarcasm, but to my surprise I find that it is. Did I really think he would've?

Lee takes a breath. His paws sit neatly in his lap, opening and closing as he talks, but he doesn't use his arms at all. "He moved down to Chevali over the summer. His dad bought him a condo there, there was a theater group he wanted to be a part of. But he couldn't stick with it. They wouldn't produce the plays he wanted, or give him the roles he wanted. He was used to being a big wheel at his college group. That's why he left Hilltown, too."

"Some of us managed to adapt," I say. I can't help it. Just the mention of Brian reminded me of the blog he wrote, the lies he told, the smug satisfaction I saw in his eyes when he snapped that picture of me with Carroll.

He looks at me along his long vulpine muzzle. "You heard the part about his father buying him a condo, right? He doesn't adapt well like we do. Never had to before. Anyway. This isn't about him. Well, it is, but..."

He takes a breath. "So Brian's all miserable, and you're in Chevali. You should've seen some of the e-mails I got from him when Chevali drafted Colin. 'How's it going to feel to be dating an ex-jock?' 'I get hard every day scanning the cut lists. ' Shit like that."

I feel my fists clench. "Sorry to have disappointed him."

Lee's tail swings around across one of his knees. "I felt bad for him, okay? I mean, not when he sent me crap like that, but he used to be my best friend."

"I used to be straight," I say. "Get over it."

His head jerks up, ears flat. "I'm trying to explain to you what the fuck has been going on!"

We stare into each other's eyes. "I'm trying to understand why you kept going to see this guy who wants to see me out of the league."

"We have a history. I can't — I couldn't just drop him like that." I must have some kind of look that clues him in to how I'm feeling, because he gets snarly. "Yeah, I know it's easy for you going from college to one team to another. I forgot, you don't keep friends, you just make new ones."

"I kept you," I snap.

His fur smooths down. His voice, when he continues, is lower, though there's still a flash in his eyes. "I tried to make him see how good a thing we have. But he has... well, you know why it's hard for him to accept that."

In that moment, I wish I'd been one of the players who'd beaten him up, so I could have the satisfaction of looking back on the memory. Just for that moment, though. "Yeah. So what *have* you been doing with him?"

He's avoiding my eyes again. I can't figure out what could be worse than sleeping with Brian. "We've mostly just been talking."

"About me."

"No!" Now he looks up, glaring at me. "About me."

Our muzzles are an inch apart. I back away from his intensity. "Okay, about you. About..." I realize I only know what Brian had to say about me. I have no idea what he would've said about Lee.

"About what I'm doing with my life. About what we used to talk about, back in college."

I can't let the pause go on too long. "The cabin in Freestone? The cockatoos?"

"Not just that." He pauses, his voice less sharp when he goes on. "Yes. But more. We were gonna change the world. He's still trying. I'm..."

"Sorry," I say. "But are you counting his writing lies about me on the Internet as 'trying'?"

"I'm not saying he's going about it right." He pulls himself up on the bed and crosses his legs, curling his tail around his lap. His ears are still back, not a good sign. But he's still naked. You don't break up with someone naked; you'd get dressed.

I lean back to face him. "How would you be doing it?"

His blue eyes flash. "You gonna let me talk, stud?"

I hold up a paw, splayed. "Not stopping you."

His ears come up, partway. He takes a breath. "When I met you, you know, I was in FLAG. I was all set to go into my senior year in English. I was probably going to live with my parents until I found somewhere to live. Well, let me back up. Originally, Brian and I planned to find a place together and be starving artists." I have to bite back the comment. I promised to let him talk. "Then... well, you know what happened to Brian. So that was gone, and I didn't really have anyone to pal around with anymore. I was kinda taking that frustration out in a lot of ways."

He checks me. I nod to show him I get what he means. "But I was still in line to get my degree, and I had... a new hobby."

I can't keep the words in. "That's all I was?"

"Was I more to you, back then?" I lower my head. "Yeah. Then it got more serious. And I wanted that." I catch the past tense and it makes my ears go down. "And then the whole thing with Morty and the Dragons came up, and poof, my degree was gone. I barely talk to my parents anymore."

"You wanted the job with the Dragons," I point out.

"Of course I did. I still do. But you know how hard that was for me."

I force sympathy into my voice. "Yeah."

"I'm just saying... in two years I went from gay rights activist and English major to a football scout who's... who's in the closet." His look defies me to contradict him. I resist. "If you'd told me back in '05 that I'd be closeted, that I'd be sharing my boyfriend with a fake girlfriend, or, what, fiancée now, that I wouldn't have finished my degree..."

"Do you want to quit your job?"

"Of course not!" He wrings his tail. "That's the problem. I want this, too." He looks right at me. "I love you."

My heart skips. "Love you, too." Some of the anger at Brian melts

away, but I can still feel it simmering inside me.

"Brian reminded me of who Wiley Farrel used to be. And could be again, sort of. We talked about old times, we talked about the political stuff that's going on now."

"I'll talk about politics with you if you want."

He keeps playing with his tail. "It's not about that. It's just... it's been really hard this year, being apart from you so much. I feel like I'm going through all this and I'm not getting any benefits." He holds up a paw as my mouth opens to speak. "And then I see you, and I feel like it's all worth it. I know you can't get yourself traded back to Hilltown. I can't get a job in Chevali. So I just have to come to grips with how to deal with that. Talking to Brian, hanging out with him, was one way of doing that."

Now he pauses. Even though he's still looking at his tail, I feel like he's waiting for me to say something. "So... what? You want my permission to keep seeing him? You didn't ask before."

"No."

Silence again. "Then what? Come on, doc, you're scaring me."

"I told you all that so you'd have a sense of what I'm going through — what I've been going through this year."

"I know it's been hard," I say. "I haven't made it any easier." I've had the thundercloud feeling ever since getting out of the shower, but now it feels more like sitting in my basement, back when I was nine, with the sirens blaring and my mother trembling as she holds me, all of us straining to hear the train-whistle shriek of the tornado. That time, it passed us by. But I'm all alone with the vast expanse of the bed between us, nobody to hold me and tell me it'll be all right. That, I get with a flash, is what Lee's supposed to be doing.

"That doesn't excuse..." His voice trails to a whisper.

"What?" He flexes his paws, doesn't answer. "You already said you didn't sleep with him. So, what, just hand jobs?" I say it lightly, but the look he gives me, ears back and looking miserable, shocks me to seriousness. "Jesus Lion Christ, really?"

"Just once. And it's not what you think. I didn't want to..."

I thought I'd been able to put aside the worry that he'd slept with Brian. This feels just as bad, worse because I wasn't expecting it. How could he lie to me about that and then drop that bomb? I get up from the bed and look for my boxers. Suddenly I don't want to hear anything else.

"I'm sure. It was all an accident, right? You were just over talking gay politics and then oops, your paw's in his lap."

"It was for you."

My boxers are half under the bed. I grab them and yank them on, folding my arms to glare down at him. "For future reference, if you're going to get me a present, I prefer video games."

He gets up from the bed. He still can't look me in the eye, but he's closer. "Will you stop being an ass and let me explain?"

I don't want to, but I can't leave yet, not in my boxers. If he were going to break up with me, I tell myself, he'd have done it already. I manage to keep the sharpness from my voice, but I can't stop my tail from lashing. "The guy hated me!" He looks at me, still miserable. I fold my arms. "Okay. Why?"

He looks away, out the window where you can see the top of some red brick building on the Aventira College campus. "I think he started to obsess about me because it was after he left Forester that everything went downhill. He never found another community, never felt at home again. So he... he came on to me a couple times."

"I knew it."

"Not until this fall," he snaps. "I told you, we never did anything in college. I wasn't lying about that."

"No, I mean, I knew he was hot for you," I say. "I believed you. Then."

"You think this is easy for me?" I notice his fists are clenched, too. He relaxes them, slowly. "Well. I told him I wasn't interested. He kept on about how he'd be better for me. Said you'd never give me what he said I deserve."

"Yeah, yeah, the cabin and the cockatoos."

"Openness. Security." He holds up a paw before I can say anything. "I told him those things weren't so important to me. He said I was blind. Christ, Dev, he was ranting on about it this one night, almost scaring me, and then he just broke down crying."

"And then you gave him a pity jack-off."

"I jacked him off because he threatened to out you."

My jaw drops, just a bit. He waits for me to collect myself. "Well," I say, "it doesn't seem to have worked. Maybe you should've blown him."

"You think I enjoyed it?"

"I don't know! For the love of God, don't tell me."

"Really?" His tail swishes back and forth.

The gnawing in my stomach is either anger or jealousy. Probably both.

"No," I say. "Is that why you didn't want to see me for a while?"

"No," he says. "I already told you about that. He was threatening to take pictures of us. The pic of you and Caroll didn't break us up, so he figured he'd get you kicked out of the league one way or another."

"And then you'd leave me?"

His eyes slide away from mine. "That's what he thought."

"Would you?"

"Not for that." The implication of those words hangs in the air, shutting me up. Lee goes on. "He flew me down a couple times to see him. I told him we'd taken a break. I hoped it'd cool him off or something. I thought if you got a starting job, that then you'd be safer, that whatever he did wouldn't matter as much."

"You were in Chevali and didn't come see me?"

His ears flatten. "He knows where you live!"

"So you just let him dictate the terms of our relationship."

"To save you from getting outed."

I hold up one finger. "I hate to keep bringing this up..."

"I'm getting to that," he snaps back. "And I was right, wasn't I? What if this had happened while you were still a backup?"

I don't have much response to that. I just glare at him and let him go on. "Anyway," he says, "it's started a discussion about gay players in football, and the more times that discussion comes up, the better it is overall. Eventually, someone's going to — "

"Whoa, whoa," I say. I think I've just figured out what's worse than sleeping with Brian. "Hang on a minute. You told him it was okay to make that announcement?"

"What?" He stops in mid-pace, staring.

"Oh," I say, "all that stuff about how some player's got to be the first to come out, and about how it's the best thing for the league, that had nothing to do with it?"

His tail is more lashing than swishing now. "You think I'd do that to you without asking?"

I shrug. "You and Brian were in that activist group for three years, four years. You can't let go of him, and you've just told me how much you

missed being that activist fox. So maybe you're trying to have it both ways, keep your football job and your football boyfriend and still do something for the cause, right?"

The room is silent. I can see his back in the closet mirror. Even his tail isn't moving. I can still smell the faint echoes of sex from the bed. "*And* you jacked him off."

His voice is more anguished even than it was when he told me about losing his identity. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't know!" I shoot back. "I just can't let go of it."

"What, ever?"

I stand really still. "You couldn't have just hugged him or something?"

He searches my eyes. His nostrils flare, his eyes narrow, anger failing to hide the pain in them. He turns and walks to the closet. "I've told you everything now," he says, pulling out a robe. "Maybe you should go."

I find my pants and shirt and get dressed. Lee's standing in his robe at the window, looking out at the college. I can hear the shriek of the tornado siren in my mind, dying out. I pick my way through the wreckage left behind, and leave the room without saying another word.

It'd be better if I didn't have to drive to the hotel alone in the car, but even the radio turned up all the way can't drown out the thoughts. He jacked off that skunk? I didn't smell anything on him. Does skunk spunk leave a smell on your paws? How long did he have to wash before it came out? And he knew all that stuff that was going on with Brian and didn't tell me about it?

Sure, but would I really have wanted to know? I had enough going on with trying to stay on the team, true, but there was just as much stress trying to figure out what he was doing, and suspecting him of God-knows-what.

And under all of this is the thing I don't want to think about, the fact that I can't offer him the life he really wants. It's not the cabin in Freestone; even I am smart enough to realize that. It's a life where we can introduce ourselves to friends as a couple, where we can maybe go to a gay pride festival and hold paws, where we can live together and share this life that we really do believe is ours.

Well, I thought it was ours. Now I'm not so sure. He seems to have been doing quite a bit of living on his own, without talking to me about it. Anger starts to fade to unease. It's all well and good to think about how he

betrayed me with Brian, and maybe with outing me...

No. I can't really believe that of him. I was angry, and it fit, but though he didn't deny it in as many words, his reaction, the hurt in his eyes and voice, told me more than any denial would have.

Probably the best thing for me to do is just stop thinking about it. Focus on tomorrow's game. I'll go to sleep, and in the morning I'll be focused on football. Then after the game, I can worry about Lee, and Brian, and the rest of the complications in my life. As much as part of me wishes things could be easier, there's a deeper part of me that knows that nothing worthwhile is easy. So when I do go to sleep that night, I try not to think about Lee too much. I fail, miserably.

Sunday morning, I get up feeling like not just my stomach, but my whole body is made up of butterflies or bees, frantic activity locked under my stripes. I'm consciously pushing away the drama with Lee. We've fought before, made up before. Now I have a game to focus on. So before our breakfast arrives, I go for a run, several laps around the hotel. The roller coaster of a week melts away until all that's left is the navy blue and grey of Aventira. Charm doesn't ask where I've been when I get back. We eat our breakfast in silence and head to the field together.

I can't stop tapping my paws, looking around the locker room. It's not just the still-new feeling of starting; it's that combined with the feeling I had the first game of my rookie season, or the first game of this season in my new position. It's the feeling I used to get before exams. None of the other guys are that excited until we get to the pre-game, an hour before kickoff, when we start to engage in our little rituals. Fisher kisses a picture of his wife. Gerrard sits staring between his knees, his long muzzle murmuring plays and configurations to himself. Jaws shadow-boxes against the wall. Aston walks around the room touching each of the starters on the shoulder as if he's blessing us, saying, "Game time. Game time. Game time." I'm heartened when he doesn't skip me.

Me, I just sit, curl and uncurl my tail, and wait for the signal for us to run out onto the field. When we do, finally, I jump up and am one of the first guys out. I'm running through the section of the tunnel that is open to the sky when I hear a voice above me: "Hey, faggot!"

My steps falter, but only for a moment. "Miski, blow me!" someone else yells. Something warm and wet hits my ear.

I slow and start to turn, to look up. Fisher's at my side, grabbing my elbow. "Come on," he says.

"Yeah, come on up and get me!" the voice yells down, growing fainter as we round the corner of the bleachers. Other voices join in: "I got something you can stick..." "Fuckin' pussy!" "Cocksucker!"

I get to my place on the sidelines and stand there, staring straight ahead. In the crowd opposite us, I can see a huge pasteboard sign that reads, "MISKI THE FAGOT." I look away from it. It makes me think of Lee, and last night's conversation. I know where the scouts sit, clustered at the fifty-yard line halfway up the stands. I scan that area, but I only see one fox, and unless Lee gained a hundred pounds overnight, it's not him. Doubt makes my muscles twitch and stomach churn.

Coach walks by, his clipboard held in front of him. He stops in front of me, facing to my right, but doesn't look at me. "Got some new fans," he says.

"Sorry about the distraction," I say, focusing on the black fur of his muzzle, his ears curved slightly back, his red and gold shirt with the Firebirds logo on the chest.

White teeth appear in a long grin. "You okay?"

"Ready to go kick some ass."

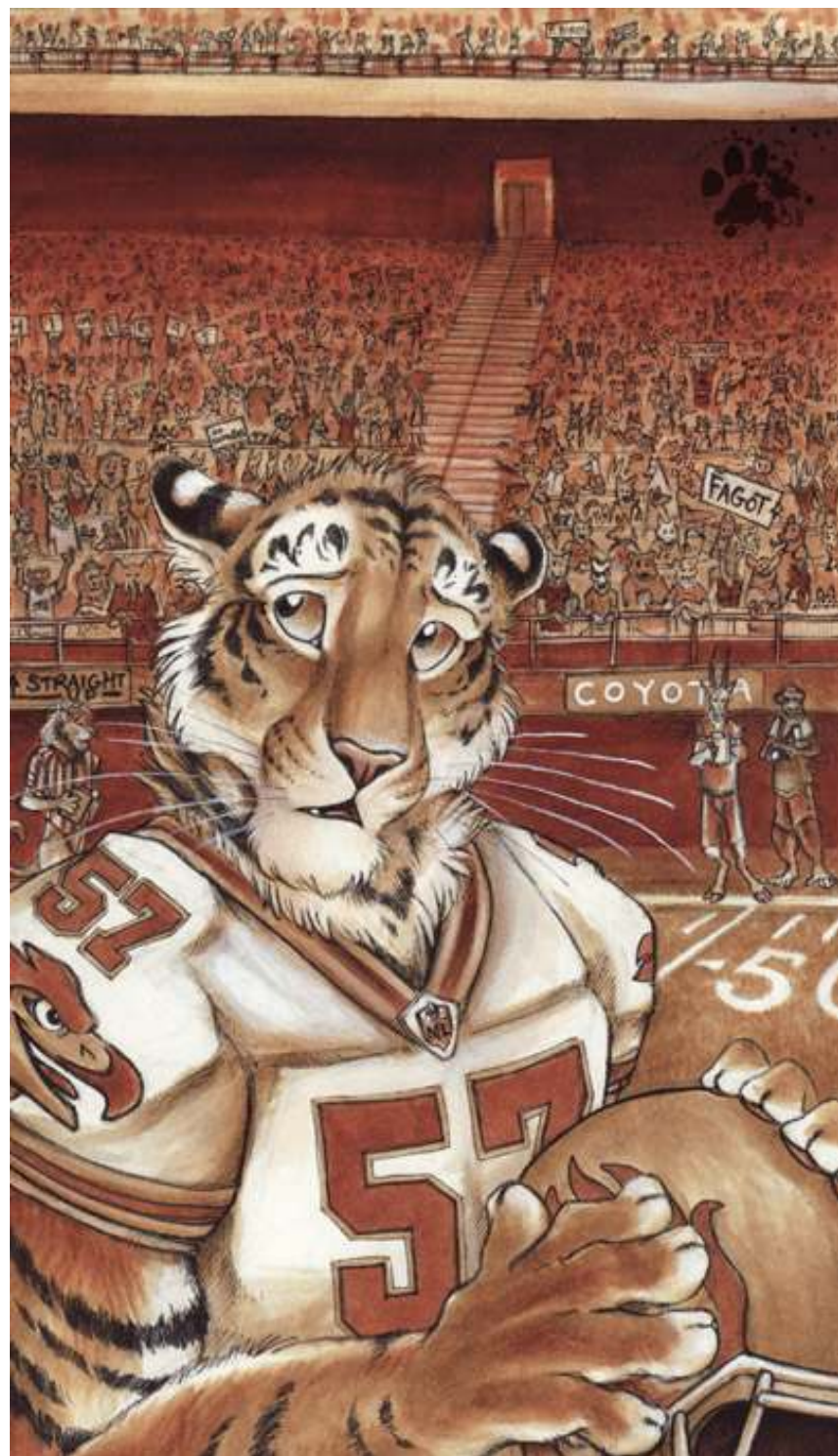
"Good." He keeps walking down the line.

I fidget all through the national anthem, through the player introductions (on the film of the game, the catcalls when my name was announced are almost a roar, but I don't even hear them) and the coin toss, until we're out on the field for the first defensive series.

It's a beautiful day, clear and chilly, perfect football weather. I huddle up with Gerrard and Carson and we get into our set. The offensive tackle across from me, a beefy stallion, catches my eye. The way we're lined up, our defensive tackle and defensive end on my side are between me and him, but to either side, meaning he can look right at me.

"Hey, fag," he yells across to me. "You get near me, I'll shove my cock down your throat."

The defensive end is Fisher. Making his first start due to injury, the defensive tackle is Brick. Fisher's tail, which had been lashing from side to side the way it always does when we get set, freezes. Brick actually looks back at me for a moment, then snaps back to attention as their quarterback comes to the line and starts the play. It's a standard run up the middle,



doesn't call for me to get near the stallion.

We line up again. Again, the stallion starts his trash talking, nasty shit aimed at me.

"We're all ready over here, fag. You're gonna be on your knees the whole game. Come by the locker room after and we'll give you something to suck in your mouth." It's hard to tune him out. I look up to the stands. The "FAGOT" sign is gone, but there are a bunch of others, day-glo colors and big ugly words and all. It looks like it's Asshole Day at Veterans Field.

The play starts, running to the opposite side. I cover the slot receiver, a lanky coyote, but it's another run. Nothing for me to do. I line up again, stare past the stallion and try not to listen to his words, or think about the signs in the stands, while all the while the voice in my head is telling me that it's never going to get better, that it's going to be like this for the rest of my career. The weight of so many people focusing their claws and teeth on me, all that hatred based on nothing more than a rumor on a website, is daunting. I'm pretty good by now at shutting out the outside world and most of my inside world to focus on football, but I've never had sixty thousand people screaming about my most private life.

I miss the snap. This is pretty much the worst thing I can do, and what's worse, the play is coming to my side. I scramble to get into position, but it's too late. The coyote I'm supposed to be covering grabs the ball and zags past me, getting another ten yards before Gerrard brings him down. He and Carson shoot warning glares my way as we line up again.

And still, I can't stop thinking about my father, wanting to see that I'm a real man; the look in Lee's eyes when I accused him of outing me. I can't shut out the stallion, who shoved me, laughing, after my botched play. They run another play for the slot receiver right away, which lets me know they smelled blood and are going to pick on me 'til I make 'em stop. This time, I'm at least in the right spot, and I know I need to make something dramatic happen, so I swipe at the ball.

I miss. He goes down the field another five yards. On the next play, Gerrard cheats to my side and they don't notice. They run it to us and we stuff the play. The jeers and trash talk get worse and worse. Next play, incomplete pass. They have to punt. I trot back to the sidelines and get chewed out by Steez.

And I can't get out of my own head. I know I'm better than this, I know I need to be able to prove it, and I know that if I'm letting them get to

me, I might as well just hang it up right now, walk away from the team after this game. That kills me, that thought that someone was able to ruin football for me to the point that I'd rather not play than play like this. Get angry, I tell myself. Who the fuck are they? What do I care?

Before I know it, I'm out there again. I clutch at the anger, using it to tune out as much as I can. It works, but it doesn't really help me focus on the plays. I'm just out there executing the mechanics, not thinking and anticipating as I need to, not fully committed to the game. It shows, too. We stop them again, and Steez warns me that Coach has been pressing him to give my newly-signed backup some playing time. "I'm okay," I tell him without conviction.

Truthfully, there's only been one other time in my life that I was this harrassed, this distracted, this obsessed. That memory comes back to me like a lightning flash: sitting in my car, stalking around my dorm room, the conflicting feelings tearing me up. I got through that, I tell myself. I can get through this. But at the end of that, there was Lee in my arms. And now... I don't know.

That's what I've been trying not to think about. He kept from me all that time he was spending with Brian, and I know that while Brian's not what he wants, Brian's closer than I am. He could have his full-on relationship, his full life, and not have to worry about being exposed, not have to worry about idiot insecure boyfriends accusing him of betrayals worse than he was already feeling guilty about. And what all of this abuse is bringing to the fore is my picture of him sitting in front of his TV, watching the signs and thinking that sooner or later he's going to be pegged as my boyfriend, and he'll be catching all of that. Or, knowing him, just wondering how long he can watch me be targeted like this. He never signed up to be part of this. I came out to the team without consulting him. If he just walks away, nobody would be the wiser. And I'd be left alone, without even the support of a boyfriend against all of the assholes out there.

Loneliness and self-pity follow me out onto the field for the next series. Gerrard tells me something about the next play that I kind of register, only it turns out I didn't really register it well. I drop back into coverage, but it's a screen to the running back. Caught in between the two places on the field where I'm supposed to be, I try to get back to make the tackle, and that damn stallion flattens me. The running back busts through,

getting halfway down the field before we run him out of bounds.

I'm on my way back to the line when Gerrard intercepts me. "Go sit down," he barks.

I look at the anger in his eyes, then at the sidelines, where Steez is staring at me with his arms folded. Nobody says a word to me as I sit down on the bench and my backup trots out to take my place.

We hold them to a field goal on that series. But Aston can't get anything going on the offensive end either, so we're down 0-3 when the half ends. I wait until everyone else is off the bench before standing. I don't want to go into that locker room, knowing how I let down the team. But I don't want to sit all alone out on the field either. Slowly, I get up and follow the last guy down the tunnel, hearing still more jeers this time. At least I don't get spit on.

I get close to the locker room, look up, and freeze. Coach is standing there, arms folded, yellow eyes calmly locked on me. I open my mouth, but before I can say anything, he beckons me closer. "I'm not gonna bite your head off," he says. "Just wanna talk to you before we go in with the rest of the guys."

A few more steps brings me within a foot of him, looking down at his black muzzle. There's not exactly sympathy on it, but at least there's no accusation. "I asked if you were okay," he says. "Sounds like they're gettin' in your head."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize," he snaps. "What I need to know is if you can take this. Because if you can't, you better hang up your uni and go home right now. We'll buy out your contract. It ain't gonna get any better, and it sure as hell might get worse."

"What would Tony Calhoun have done?" I ask, to avoid answering his question.

I get a surprised look, and then a sharp bark that might be a laugh or might be a reproach. "Rigatony? He wouldn'ta brought his boyfriend to the locker room, or made a scene in front of the team. It was a damn shame about him, but you think he's the only one had a secret to hide? You think he's the only one got stuff written about him? You seen those blogs where they make up pictures of Aston getting buttfucked by that singer?"

"I don't really..."

He cuts through my words. "I need guys on this team can play

football. I can't make the other team stop talking. I can't get rid of those signs. I can't even make everyone on my team like you. What I can do, the only thing I can do, is put a team on the field that can play the game. So if you're gonna play, let me know. If not..." He looks at the locker room, his ears dipping a little. "We got someone who can stand on the field in your position. Believe me when I say I'd rather have you out there. Corey's a little better, but the dropoff after you..." He shakes his head. "You got halftime to think about it. Come on, I gotta fire up the troops."

I follow him into the locker room and slump down on the bench, listening with half an ear to his rousing speech. Nobody talks to me. Only Fisher sits near me. He doesn't move when Coach's speech is done, waiting for me to say the first word. It takes me a while to think of what that word will be.

"Did Tony have a boyfriend?"

Clearly, that's not what he was expecting. He furrows his brow, then realizes who I'm talking about. "Yeah." He ducks his head in a kind of nod. "Talked about him a little bit. That got him in trouble."

"What could you have done to help him that you didn't?"

Now his eyes widen, like I sank a claw into his ass. "I'm doin' what I can," he says roughly, softly. "I..." He grimaces. "Don't want you to end up like him."

"I'm almost there, Fish," I say. "Ain't your fault. You were right about what would happen."

He shrugs. "It's out now. Can't close that box. What's your fox say about it?"

I close my eyes. "It's a long story." I don't know how I'm going to be able to get off this bench for the second half.

Something taps my paw. I look down. He's holding my cell phone in his outstretched paw. Its red light blinks, steadily. "You got a message," he says.

I grab the phone and flip it open. There's half a dozen voicemails, and one text message: "**Lee 1:36 pm:** 116, 2/3 way up," it says.

The rush in my head is blinding. I lose track of the locker room, the aches in my legs and back, anything that isn't those bright characters on my phone screen. I can feel him through the phone lines or radio waves or whatever the hell they are. *He's here. I didn't ruin everything.*

I become aware of Fisher, watching me. Again, he doesn't expect what

I say: "Hey, Fish, where's one-sixteen? Out there." I gesture toward the field.

"Huh? Damned if I know. Why?"

"That's where he is."

The phone chimes as if agreeing with me. I look down and see a new message from Lee: "You're better than they know."

Fisher's looking curious. I'm almost bouncing on the bench, energy suddenly not a problem anymore. To show off how clever and supportive my boyfriend is, I hand him the phone. He appraises it, rubbing his whiskers. "Smart fox," he says. "I can't figure out how to send one of those damn things." I glare, and he grins. "About football, too."

"Yeah." I snap the phone shut. "Good thing, too."

Brick has been glancing our way. When he sees me shut the phone and stand up, he ambles over. I tense up. I have no idea what to expect.

We stare at each other for a moment. He clears his throat. "Hey," he says. "You comin' back out?"

"Yeah." I squeeze the phone.

"Good. We're gettin' killed out there. You want I should shut that fuckin' big-lipped motherfucker up?"

Fisher's looking at me. I shake my head. "Let 'im talk. I'll take care of him." My shoulders relax and my tail uncurls. I grin at the big bear. "Thanks." He just grunts and ambles away.

Coming out through the tunnel, the yells and taunts start up. Even though I was expecting them, I flinch. In the security of the locker room, it was easy to summon my courage. Here on the field, I'm in danger of losing it again. It's like I stepped into my apartment and found a police copter outside shining a light on me. There's nowhere I can hide.

Coach finds me right away, pacing the bench in front of the backup defense. "Am I sending you in?"

"Where's section one-sixteen?" I ask him.

He stares at me like I'm crazy, which I guess I can understand because I kind of am. "You need to know that?"

"Put me in," I say. "But where's one-sixteen?"

He points to a part of the stands just past the edge of our bench. "Don't go climbing up there. You're on in two minutes."

I raise a paw, already jogging past the bench. Colin, who was sitting on the bench watching, gets up to follow me. "You're not going back in,"

he says. "Come on, you're getting killed out there."

"Mind your own fucking business." I scan the sections. I don't see him. Two thirds of the way up, two thirds of the way up. Nothing. Icy doubt taps my heart.

"I know you want to prove yourself," he says in his church-proper voice, "but you're hurting the team."

"Speaking of hurting the team," I say, "I think there's a bit of the bench getting cold."

"Nobody else thinks you should be on the field," he snarls. "It's nothing to do with being able to handle your... lifestyle. It's because *you* can't handle it any more."

"Leave me alone, *teammate*" I snap.

Down the line, Gerrard yells my name. I still don't see Lee in the stands. "The best thing for the team is for you to sit down," Colin says.

Gerrard yells my name again. I turn away from the stands. Was Lee just lying to try to make me feel better? I bump Colin's shoulder on my way past him to join the defense on the field. It's juvenile and immature, and it makes me feel at least a little better, more prepared to go out there and hit people.

The stallion picks up right where he left off. "Back for more, cocksucker?" he yells. "Bring it on, fudge-packer. I'm gonna fuck you up so hard your boyfriend's gonna feel it."

Fat chance, I think, and then the ball is snapped. They come right at me again, running to the weak side. Gerrard's ready for it, so between the two of us, Brick, and Fisher, we hold them. Going back to the line, Gerrard says to me, "You listening to me? Watch the dump off. They love cutting that slot guy across the middle on second and long."

"Dump off," I say, looking at the stands. All I see are signs: "MISKI SUCKS" and "HOMO-SKI."

"Hey!" he barks. "Get your damn head in the game. You got this one series to prove yourself."

"I'm in," I say. I turn away from the stands, but the image of the crowd of people stays in my head. Just because I can't see Lee, does that mean he's not here? It comes down to that, to whether I choose to believe him or not. If I think he's lying, that he sent me that text because he was feeling sorry for me, then I should go tell Steez to take me out right now.

The stallion is jawing again, but I can't hear any of the words. Christ, I

wish it didn't take me this long to work things out. For the first time this game, I look at the formation they're lining up in and I see what Gerrard is talking about, the slot receiver cheating to the inside, leaning into his route before the snap. I see it all unfold in my head, his quick paws slipping between Brick and Fisher to grab the ball. I can see the spot of turf where it's going to happen.

Gerrard's looking at me. I give him a quick nod. I stare across the line at the stallion, trying to bore a hole in his ridiculous long head with my eyes. My blood pumps. Lee is in the stands because he has to be, because I belong here on the field and he belongs here with me. Nothing else matters. I know he's watching me as surely as I know where the coyote is going to be in seven seconds.

Six. Five. Four.

Three. The center snaps the ball. The offensive line moves as one, forward into us, protecting the quarterback. We jump after them as one, a split-second later. The red wolf in the navy blue uniform cocks the ball in his paws.

Two. The coyote springs across the line, between Brick and Fisher. He looks back at the wolf. I'm already moving forward. One. The ball is in the air.

Zero. I step in front of the coyote and reach out my paws. The ball slaps into them. I bring it down.

Time speeds up again. The field is clear in front of me. Fisher's seen the interception and the stallion spinning to lunge at me from the side. He cuts the horse's knees out from under him, a beautiful illegal block that the refs will not see to throw a flag on. I juke to the side and sprint, giving it all I've got. I feel everything click, the world turning under me as I skim its surface. The end zone is so close I can reach out and touch it.

I get tackled from the side. Instinct kicks in; I cradle the ball to me as I fall, though paws are trying to rip it free. I hit the ground under a pile of navy jerseys and hear the shrill whistle. I still have the ball. Paws reach in, muzzles bite. Even in bed with Lee, I never got groped this hard. The whistles keep going. The paws slow, then stop. Everyone around me, a sea of navy, gets up slowly, reluctantly. I lay there, holding on to the moment as tightly as the ball, until Fisher and Gerrard grab me and haul me to my feet, clapping me on the back.

"Flags?" I ask, dizzy, still holding the ball tightly.

"No flags!" Gerrard screams even though the crowd is silent except for scattered boos. "No flags!"

One of the officials comes over to get the ball from me. I give it up and look, out of old habit, to the stands. There, one section over from where Coach told me one-sixteen is, about two-thirds of the way up, a fox is standing. I can't see any detail from here, but I don't have to. He's looking at me and I'm looking back at him, and the last piece of the world clicks into place.

This would be the perfect ending for my story, and if I could stop time and live in that moment forever, I'd be sorely tempted to. I get mobbed back on the sidelines, stumbling my way through pats and bear hugs until I get to Coach's long lupine grin. "Nice job, Miski," he says. I stand with Gerrard and Carson on the sideline and watch us punch the ball into the end zone for a 7-3 lead. Everything is perfect, everything is going to be all right.

But if I end the story here, I won't be able to tell you how I scream at the team on the sidelines to get going, I'm so pumped up; how on the next series, Brick gets flagged for a penalty on a vicious hit where he throws the stallion to the ground; how I drop their running back for a loss, not once, but twice; or how Fisher takes out the stallion, leaving me a clear path to the quarterback for one of four sacks we get in the second half. I won't be able to tell you about the field goal Charm adds to regain his confidence, how the 10-3 score holds up to the final whistle, how Coach gives me the game ball and how, when I say I'm going to soak it in for fifteen or twenty minutes before showering, a good two-thirds of the team wait with me.

Most importantly, I won't be able to tell you about the post-game press conference.

We're all freshly showered and dressed, kidding and joking. Winning solves a lot of problems, Coach likes to say, and for the moment, I feel good about the team, and about my place in it. Coach comes over and jerks his head to the exit. "Come on," he says. "Time to meet the press. They want you."

Fisher pats me and Gerrard as we follow Coach's wagging black tail. I've seen the media room in our stadium before, but of course haven't spent a lot of time there. The ESPN otter, Frank Evien, is actually there, and so is a ringtail that I think is from the Sporting News, and about thirty other reporters. The buzz in the room jumps when we walk in.

Coach gets the first seat, with me in between him and Gerrard. Behind us is a big wall of the Aventira logo. I sit down and have the same surreal feeling of being the center of attention, only surreal because I haven't had it since college. I used to bask in it, then. Now there's an undercurrent of worry, knowing what questions may come up, but I resolve to keep it about football at the same time as Gerrard leans over to me and says, "Keep it about the game."

The ringtail gets the first question, identifying himself as Dwight from the Sporting News. He asks Coach about the game plan and the rejuvenated defense. Coach sings my praises for a while, and the next question is for me, from Frank. He wants to know if I did anything different to prepare for Aventira. I tell him that my success is all due to Coach's plan, and I give Gerrard full credit for setting me up to be in the right position at the right time. They ask Gerrard about the defense, about me and Corey (he and Coach both deflect questions about Corey: "Devlin is our starter next week, after that, we'll see how it works out, but he's making a case every week. "). I'm just starting to relax a bit, and then an older raccoon, in the back, raises a paw.

"Craig Michaels, Outsports.com. For Devlin," he says. "Would you care to address the recent rumors regarding your sexuality that have been appearing on the Internet?"

The room goes quiet. "No," I say shortly.

"Oh, come on," says a familiar voice from the back. "We all know it, we just want to hear you say it."

Everyone turns to the figure I know is there: a spotted skunk in a silk shirt and khakis, with a tweed blazer thrown over it. The team's media liaison, a weasel named Vince, walks around the room towards him. "I'm sorry, sir, what publication are you with?"

"I'm with TightPants.com," Brian says.

Vince checks his clipboard. "You're not on the approved list," he says.

"But I'm the one who broke the story about Miski," Brian says, smirking directly at me.

Vince makes a signal, and a couple bears in Aventira security uniforms that had been edging toward Brian now walk directly toward him. He shies back with a familiar mix of panic and indignation, saying, "I see how it is. Nobody wants to hear the truth!"

"Sir," Vince says, "I'm going to ask you to leave, and if you don't,

these gentlemen will escort you out."

Brian looks back and forth at the bears, then points up at me. "Tell the truth!" he yells.

Vince makes a sign, but the bears are already moving towards Brian. "The truth!" he screams, and then darts out of the room.

There's a moment of silence as all the reporters look at each other. Then they turn back to the podium like an offensive line just after the snap. Paws go in the air, voices jockey for position, and Vince runs back to the front of the room with his paws up, trying to keep order. I can't hear his voice, but I hear Coach's deep growl cut through the chatter. "We're only going to answer questions about the game."

"Coach," someone calls from the back, "what's your position on gay football players?"

"Can you confirm the rumors about Devlin?"

"Devlin, what's your comment?"

I see Coach's ears go back. Gerrard's are already back. I lean forward to my microphone. "Listen," I say, "we're here to talk about the game. There's nothing else to discuss."

It takes them a little while to calm down. We answer a few more questions about the game, but they're almost formalities. As soon as he can, Coach ends the conference. We march back to the locker room in silence. Coach stops just outside it, turns, and jabs me in the chest with a finger. "That needs to stop," he growls.

Gerrard waits just in the doorway, watching. I spread my paws. "What do you want me to do?"

"You know that skunk. Do whatever it takes. I'm not having this distraction around."

"Thanks," I say.

"Hey, you need any support from the team, you name it. But this is your issue, and you gotta deal with it."

"Fine," I say, knowing I'm gonna need Lee on this one, big time.

My phone's blinking all the time now. I pick it up at my locker, weighing it in one paw. Gerrard comes over. "Listen," he says. "You play like you did today, all this other stuff will just go away."

"Wish I could believe that." I look at the blinking light, counting in my head. Ogleby twice, probably, my parents, Carroll maybe. Lee.

"The guys really pulled behind you."

"Easy when I'm winning the game," I say. "What about... when I have a bad day?"

He grins and punches my shoulder. "Just make sure your bad days are pretty good."

What about when Corey comes back, is what I wanted to say. Is he just building up my confidence because he's stuck playing alongside me for now? I'm brooding as I flip the phone open and listen to my six messages — I was off by one. Ogleby called three times, and Carroll didn't call at all. Some other agency did, wanting to know if I'm interested in changing representation.

I delete that one. Ogleby's an idiot, but I've heard enough horror stories about other agents that I don't want to risk changing without a personal recommendation. Ogleby called during the first half (depressed), during the second half (ecstatic), and again during the press conference, nearly incomprehensible on that last one. All I can get out of what he's saying is that he's setting up a press conference in Chevali on Monday afternoon for me to deny all the rumors formally. Seems like he should've consulted me, but whatever. My parents are ecstatic, but then, they called right at the end of the game and probably didn't see the press conference. And Lee called right after the interception, knowing he'd get my voicemail, telling me that he believes in me.

I know what I'm going to say to Lee. I'm still feeling pretty good about myself, so I dial my parents first, plugging in my earpiece on the way to the team bus. It's parked just outside the stadium.

"You were terrific," Dad gushes. "You just had to shut out all those signs. Bastards. I tell you, anyone from Aventira comes into the shop, they're gonna get charged for a whole mess of crap."

"Great, Dad," I say. "Just don't get arrested for fraud."

He laughs. "You can bail me out. Starring for the Firebirds! Jerry went out and bought a Firebirds pennant. We put it up in the shop."

"If I score a touchdown, will you wear the jacket I got you?"

"Hey, we just saw that press conference. What's that guy's deal?"

I get out to the lot. Some of the guys are milling around talking on their own phones, some are already on the bus. I pick an isolated spot and lean against a wall. "He's got issues."

"Ha. I'll say. Didn't he see the game?"

Colin, talking to one of the wideouts, spots me and walks abruptly

onto the bus. Normally I'd let the comment go, but watching Colin and feeling as good as I do makes me chippy. "What's that have to do with anything?"

He doesn't seem to notice. "Give it time, keep making those picks, the rumors'll go away."

Charm gives me a thumbs-up as he gets on. Beyond him, Brick isn't paying any attention to me, but he didn't run onto the bus. "What if they don't?"

"Look, Dev, your family knows they're lies, and your team does too. That's what counts. Don't worry about what they think."

"You know, Dad..." I try to pull my courage together, but this isn't the time, not over the phone. "There's, uh, there's a guy on the team. He came out to me in private. Because of the rumors."

He laughs. "Who is it? It's Aston, isn't it?"

"Dad. I'm just saying, he's a good player. What does that have to do with him being gay?" I keep my voice down, now. There are a couple canids nearby with their ears perked. Not at me, but still.

"Nothing, nothing," Dad says. "Look, it's perfectly fine for some fox or even a wolf. I'm just saying, people trying to say that a tiger is... like that, I mean, and one of my boys?"

He pauses. I step into the silence. "Y'eah?"

His tone gets sharper, more serious. "I'm not worried about that, Dev, I mean it. I don't even want to think about it. You just keep doing what you're doing, and nobody will think you're abnormal."

"Jesus, Dad, you do know it's not 1950 any more, right?"

"I don't understand why we're even having this discussion."

In the background, I hear my mom saying, "What discussion, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," he says to her.

She sounds plaintive. "Is this about that phone call? Tell him —"

"It's not about that," he snaps. "I don't even know what this is about."

That last seems to be back to me, so I say, "I have gay friends, okay? I don't want you badmouthing them."

"Fine." He settles back on his side of the line, wary. "Just don't ever tell me who they are. I don't wanna be thinking that when I watch a game, okay?"

Fisher taps me on the shoulder. I look up and notice that almost

everyone's on the bus. "I gotta go, Dad. Thanks for the call. Take care, okay? Love to Mom."

"Proud of you, son," he says.

I hold the phone in my paw and snap it shut, without answering. Fisher's got to see my expression, but he doesn't say anything as we get on the bus and take a pair of seats near the front. I know I should call Lee, but there's no real opportunity until we get to the airport. I end up brooding maybe more than I should, until a couple of the guys thank me for the day off tomorrow—that's a team tradition for the guy who helped win the game.

I get about ten minutes to call Lee, but he doesn't answer. That bothers me; wouldn't he want to talk to me after my big game? He left a message and everything. I tell him I'm getting on the plane and when I'll be landing. On the plane, my nagging doubts start to smolder and itch, until, to my surprise, Brick grabs the seat next to mine. He ropes me into replaying the game, how that Aventira stallion was fuming by the end of it. I tell him more than once what a great hit he laid on him and he says something about the lippy motherfucker deserving it. It takes me most of the three-hour flight to realize that in his roundabout way, he's trying to feel out whether I'm okay, whether all the crap that went on is affecting me. Fisher, Gerrard, and Carson join in, going over key plays. Of course, Gerrard brings up things we could've done better, things he wants to work on for next week. We make fun of him and call him a suck-up to the coaches. Good rimes.

I catch Brick alone on our way out of the plane, having spent the last hour working out exactly the words to ask what I wanted to know. "Uh," I say, "so, we cool?"

He looks me up and down. "Just cause we talk game don't mean I want to do nothin' else with ya."

"Oh, get the fuck over yourself. You're not that hot."

His eyes widen. He opens his mouth to say something, reconsiders, opens his mouth again. Bears aren't the quickest thinkers in the world. I wait as we walk.

Finally he comes up with, "I don't want you lookin' at me in the shower."

"Well, I don't want you lookin' at me, either," I say.

He snorts. We walk in silence for a while, 'til we get to his car. I hang

out for a second while he opens the door. "Hey, I appreciate you, y'know, taking out that stallion."

"He called you a faggot," he says. "That ain't cool."

I have to suppress a laugh. "Coming from you? That ain't cool?"

"Ain't nobody else's business," he growls. "You're *our* faggot." Then he gives me a sideways look, daring me to be offended by what he said. Strangely enough, I'm not.

Another of the tackles interrupts us as Brick's getting into his car. "Hey," he says, "a bunch of the guys want to go to Mick's. You two coming?"

"Sure," Brick rumbles. I'm still all caught up in the part-of-the-team feeling, so I go along. I call Lee on the way, to tell him I'll be around to talk later, and get his voicemail again. I don't leave a message, this time.

While I'm getting mildly buzzed on beer and testosterone, a couple of the guys take it on themselves to give me advice. They echo Brick: ain't nobody else's business. Just deny the rumors, they say, and it'll all fade out. It feels weird to me, everyone knowing and talking about it, but I can't rule out the possibility that it's just the beer. I dunno, I'd be okay with all of that if not for one thing. Or, rather, one fox.

I start to dial Lee again in the car on the way home and then I think, hell with it, he didn't call me all night, he can call me back when he's ready. I'm starting to think about what I'm going to say at the press conference tomorrow, if I'm even going to show up. But of course I will. There's a message on my phone from Carol saying she's got a flight out in the morning to be there. Besides, Ogleby will already have called all the reporters and all that crap, and it'll look worse if I don't show. I figure as long as I keep playing like I did today, the team will live with me. I can deny everything in public, and things will maybe die down. Never completely, but at least somewhat. Brian's not getting any more believable with his stories.

But I need Lee. I think about how I felt when I saw him at the game — hell, when I just convinced myself he was there. Without him, I'd be adrift, like playing on the mud up in Hilltown. Okay, that wasn't 'adrift,' that was more like slogging. The point is, it wouldn't be as much fun. And I can't imagine that Lee's gonna be okay with me standing up in public to tell the world how straight I am.

Well, I think, unlocking the door to the apartment building, maybe I'm

not okay with him spending tons of time with his BFF Brian after all. Even if he did claim it was for me. That angry justification doesn't sit any better with me than the idea of the press conference itself did. It feels like lining up across from a familiar play and knowing where to go and who to cover, only there's one player out of position and it nags at me, because I don't know if he's making a mistake or if I'm missing something. I hate that feeling. I'm gonna have to start drinking better beer.

I can't stop thinking about Lee, though. Even the elevator smells like him. The slow ride up makes me pace back and forth. Why would he send me that text, lead me to believe everything was okay, and then disappear afterwards? Was it some kind of lesson, that he wanted to show me that I'd be okay on my own? It'd be just like him to show up and pretend he was supporting me, a kind of after-school special "the magic was in you all along" kind of bullshit. What if he's decided he'd rather be with someone who'll let him be out and open, and he just felt sorry for me? I can't keep both Lee and football, it looks like. Either I come out and have a boyfriend, or I disavow him and keep my career. If it comes right down to it, what would I pick? They're both parts of my life.

I can't imagine getting up on a fall morning and not having a game to prepare for.

I can't imagine never getting up in the morning next to him again.

And the elevator seems to crawl while I'm thinking this, the beer no doubt contributing to the slowness of time and my thought process. Every time I'm on top of the world, something comes along to knock me off. And if something doesn't, I can count on my own stupid brain to come up with it. I take out the phone. I'm gonna have to talk to Lee tonight, even if I leave a rambling message on his answering machine. At least I'm still sober enough to make sure I dial the right number this time.

The elevator doors open on six. I get hit with his scent, strong and vulpine, creeping into my nose and brain like part of a jigsaw. He's sitting with his knees drawn up, or he was; he's now in the process of standing. A small overnight bag sits next to him on the hallway floor. He brushes down the front of his tight yellow rugby shirt, hooks his paws into the waistband of his tight jeans, but there's nothing tight about his smile or the easy waving of his tail. "I thought you'd be home sooner," he says.

"The guys went out to Mick's," I say, standing in the hall like an idiot. Football seems an age away now.

"You were great." He ducks his head. "I had some frequent flier miles..."

Standing there in the hall looking at him, warmth blossoms in my chest. It amazes me that I can have two such incredible life-affirming moments in one day as my first big-league interception and this moment right here. I can't say anything like that, of course. For one thing, I can't speak well enough to do it justice, and for another, even if I could, I'm not a sappy new age faggot. I'm a tough studly jock faggot.

So I say to my boyfriend, "Come inside." It's not very romantic, but I like to think the rasp in my voice is.

"Nice Bogie," he says, as I unlock the door.

"Been practicing," I say, pleased that he noticed. I close the door behind him. "I should get you a spare key."

"I don't expect to pop in often." He chuckles and slides up to me as soon as the door is locked.

I wrap my arms around him. "Maybe you should."

He sticks his muzzle under my chin. "That mean we're okay?"

"I dunno. Did you fly down just to see me?"

His sigh sends warm ruffles through my fur. "I thought tomorrow I could go over to Brian's, try to talk him out of disrupting your press conference."

I push him away, but he clings to me. I stare down at him. "You couldn't lie to me? Just for a bit?"

He's got big, blue, trusting eyes when he wants. "Not any more."

I grumble and stop pushing him away. He presses closer and goes on. "I booked the ticket just to see you at first. Then Brian called to tell me to make sure to watch the press conference because it was going to be, quote, fireworks. He said this conference is going to be you telling the world how straight you are."

I stop pushing, apprehensive. "Yeah," I say. "Something like that. Uh, Ogleby called it. I haven't really decided if I should go."

His paws rest on my hips, his eyes on mine. "Why would you not go?"

I expected him to tell me what I should do. He never ceases to surprise me, my fox. "Well, I guess because... I haven't decided what I want to do."

He presses up against me. "I think I know. But I bet you mean about tomorrow."

"Oh yeah. There's no question about tonight." I squeeze his rear. "Not

any more."

"Any more?" He tilts his head.

Stupid mouth of mine. "After we left... I just wasn't sure... I mean..."

"Y'eah, I wasn't either." His paws work slowly on my shirt, untucking it. "I mean, the way you left. But it was my fault too. I always think I know what's best."

I look down at his paws, then back at him. "You usually do."

A flash of a smile. "Don't boost my ego."

"But I'm glad you're here now."

He's got his paws in the waistband of my pants. He pushes them down further. "Good," he says, as if he couldn't tell. "So tell me again why you wouldn't go to the press conference?"

"I'm not so sure I can act straight."

He laughs. "Well, not when your boyfriend has his paws on your sheath, I guess."

I shiver, leaning over to nuzzle his ears. "Hopefully you won't be doing that during the conference."

"Seriously," he says. "Would you not go because of me?"

It's getting a little hard for me to form coherent sentences. I shove my paws down the back of his pants to cup his bare rear. "Uh, well, not specifically because of you, but, sort of?"

He squeezes, making my whole body tense. "I think you should go."

I gasp. My tail wraps around the back of his legs. "I think I'm gonna come, first."

His paw slides up and down. His muzzle finds mine, and he doesn't argue with me. It feels so good to be holding him again, for our lips to be together, our tongues sliding back and forth, the familiar taste of him, his scent, overwhelming. While we kiss, his paws are busy, pushing my shirt off my shoulders, then sliding down my sides to lower my pants while I finish wriggling out of the shirt. I push his pants down, but we have to break the kiss to get his shirt off over his head.

He stands with his shirt dangling from one paw, looking at me. I return the favor, taking in the sleek lines of his trim body, white fur curving from the fluff of his chest in to his stomach, down to that beautiful V between his legs. I look up to his muzzle, slender and slightly parted, to the large peaks of his ears, and finally down to his eyes, twin sapphires now meeting mine. He reaches out a paw. I take it, and we walk together to the bed.

I wait for him to set me down, or get up on all fours, but at the bed, he presses against me and kisses me again, and I lose track of time. I've got one paw across his back, the other cupping his rear, while his paws are just linked behind my tail.

"Whew," I pant as our muzzles part. I glance down at the bed, and back at him with eyebrows raised.

He gives me a quirky smile, and says, "You wanna sit down?"

I tease a fingerpad up his erect shaft, to watch him shiver. He does, but his smile doesn't waver. Neither does mine. "What'cha got in mind, doc?"

He brings a paw up to my chest, but he doesn't push, just brushes the fur up and down. "Something a little different."

So I sit on the bed, back to the headboard. He gets up and straddles my legs, scooting up until his shaft rests beside mine against my stomach fur. Teasing mine lightly with a fingerpad, he says, "I did some more thinking, after the other night."

I look down between us, deliberately. "Do we have to talk about this now?"

He nods. "It won't take long, I promise. I just want to clear up something."

Guilt seizes my chest, at what I never apologized for. "I never thought you agreed to that," I blurt out, bringing my paws around to his hips as much to steady myself against his teasing as to feel him. "The stuff he posted, I mean, I know you wouldn't."

"I know," he said. "But that's not what I mean."

"And whatever you did with him..."

He lifts his paw away. "Dev."

I shake my head. "No, listen. I don't like it, but I know..." I inhale. "I know you didn't, uh, mean it. I just wanna ask you one favor."

He looks amused. "Anything."

"Don't ever tell me which paw it was."

It feels so good to hear his laugh. "And then you'll forgive me?"

"I already have," I say.

He leans forward and kisses me softly. When the softness threatens to turn more passionate, he pulls back. "Thank you. But what I was talking about was the whole Wiley Farrel the activist thing."

"Oh." I cup my ears forward.

He rests his paws on my arms. "That's a part of me I won't get rid of. I

can't. But I don't have to let it rule my life, either. It's hard to let go of childhood dreams."

"For both of us," I murmur, slipping a paw between us to squeeze his cock against mine.

He grins at me, ears cupping forward. "But I got the best reason in the world to be grateful for where I am and where I'm going. Sometimes I just get greedy and want to have it all."

Since he didn't tell me to stop, I let go of myself and stroke him gently up and down. His tail swishes back and forth over my legs. "I want you to have it all," I say.

He kisses my nose. "I'm okay with not. After you left, I thought, would I be happy if I could have my English degree and my activist friends and not have you any more? Well," his grin gets sly and wide, "it turns out that's one of the easiest questions I've ever been asked. It's no contest."

That warm feeling in my chest spreads all through me. "You can still do some activist stuff," I say.

He nods. "I will. But I'll talk to you about it. Maybe we can think of some stuff to do together, anonymously."

I spread my paw, hold my cock against his again. "I can think of some stuff to do together right now."

"Yeah." He presses into the grip. "That's all I wanted to say. Still got your lube in the side drawer there?"

By way of answer, I reach out and open the drawer, taking out the little bottle. I hand it to him, but he shakes his head. "You wanna do it?"

"Me?" He nods. "Sure, I guess." I dump out some into my paw and reach around behind him, without looking away from his muzzle. I hold his rear with my dry paw, feeling the muscles all tight for my benefit, while I tease the fur away from his tailhole and press the small pool of wet up into it. As my fingers rub around and then inside, he sighs, his eyes half-closing.

I rub probably longer than I need to, claws carefully sheathed, until he says, "I think I'm okay."

"I know. I'm enjoying it." I am, but I'm also feeling the more and more urgent need to have something else in there. So I squeeze some more lube onto my paw and rub myself up and down until I'm super-slick and gasping.

"Ready?" he says softly, and I don't need to answer. He lifts his hips,

moving forward, and even in the unfamiliar position, I have no trouble situating my cock under him. He's at my eye level, leaning forward for another kiss, then sinking slowly down.

Every nerve in my body comes alive. "Oh, foxy," I gasp. I take hold of his shaft with my slickened paw and hear nothing else in the room but his high moan, echoing in my ears. He's got hold of my shoulders, I'm holding his hips with one paw and stroking him with the other, and he's moving up and down slowly. I want to ask why we never did this before, this position, I mean, but the word "Why" comes out as a throaty moan, so I stop trying to form words.

His muzzle curves into a warm smile, a smile that goes all the way up to his eyes. I can feel the beginning of his knot under my fingers, hot and hard. He leans forward, I lean forward to meet him, and our muzzles meet in the middle, parting to allow our tongues to move together as our lips press close.

I kiss him, holding him, thrusting up into him as he moves his hips up and down atop me. His slender body and warm chest writhe against mine, our noises growing more urgent as our movements quicken. I try not to stroke him too quickly, but he's riding me up and down and my tongue's in his muzzle, my head filled with the scent of fox. Together we move, together we moan, and as I feel my climax tingle and build in my body, surging in my shaft, I squeeze him and stroke faster. His body tenses, his breath as hard across my muzzle as mine is across his.

And when we come, we come within a few seconds of each other, first me thrusting hard up into him, holding him down atop me as my body explodes into him. Then him, his long groan of pleasure echoing into my muzzle, his passion spurting out over my paw. We squirm against each other, panting, moaning, sharing each other. We come down together, too, our muzzles parting. We keep our noses together, blue eyes meeting gold, and smile goofily like a couple teenagers in love.

In my bed, later, I lie on my back and he lies on top of me. I run my paws down his naked back to his rear, squeezing it and feeling the warmth of my hips still there. His tail swishes back and forth over me. The muted noises of the city outside surround us. A plane rumbles past. I don't want to talk, and he doesn't seem to either, but after a while, he props himself up on his elbows, paws behind my head, and looks down at me.

"So you're going to go to the conference tomorrow?"

I raise my eyebrows. "With all this practice at being straight, how can I not?"

He touches his nose to mine. "I know I said I'm not giving up my activism. But I don't want to lose you, either."

I hold his sides. "You don't want to lose Devlin Miski the UFL player?"

He flashes a smirk, then gets serious. "I don't want to lose my boyfriend. All those signs, the abuse at Aventira, they were scary. I thought for the first time that someone might actually hurt you."

"They're just all talk."

"Hon." My ears perk up. "All it takes is one who's not. Some drunk guy with a bottle, some religious fanatic, anything like that. Not to mention the team. I mean, even if they know, it'll be such a huge deal that it's out, it'll take over everything. When Corey gets better, they'll cut you just to let the team focus on football. Not to mention that your friends might support you in private, but if you're publicly out, it'd hurt their image to be seen with you."

"Didn't you used to talk about endorsements? The first gay player would clean up on gay endorsements?"

He exhales. I love the smell of his breath across my muzzle. "You have to be playing, though. And it's not worth your life."

I kiss him. We lie in the bed quietly after that. I feel his vibrant, lovely body against mine, and curl my tail up to touch his. It's easy for me to relax now. He's given me everything I wanted: I can keep football and boyfriend, have my public life and my secret life. Better than Tony Calhoun, better than that other player who came out after retiring, as good as all those other guys who play football and hide secrets in their closets. Everything's going to be okay. I can relax.

I lie awake thinking for nearly an hour after he's gone to sleep.

I kiss him good-bye in the morning when he goes off to see Brian, and I go to pick up Caroll at the airport to take her to lunch. The first thing she says when she gets in the car is, "This story had better go away, or I need to find some better use of my time. No offense."

"None taken."

"All right then. Just so we're on the same page." She's been thinking about it on the plane, I guess, because she launches right into a bunch of

different ways I could handle it, how to deny things flat out without equivocating (her word) so it doesn't look like I'm lying or making excuses. She also says we should announce our engagement at the conference.

"You're pretty good at lying," I tell her.

"Image maintenance," she says with a wink.

I raise my glass to her just as I see, out of the corner of my eye, a blur of motion, a little jumping up and down brown blur in a shiny grey suit. It homes in on our table and I recognize Ogleby. We've only met a couple times, but there's no mistaking his voice, and besides, he recognizes me.

"Dev, baby, there you are!" He pulls up a chair to the table without asking. "Caroll, darling, you look marvelous. Louise says your career is taking off. Congratulations! She's great. Dev, listen, I got a script for you to follow at the conference today. It's very simple, you can memorize it, but if you can't, I got it written down here." He pulls a sheet of paper from his inside jacket pocket and slides it across the table, snapping his fingers for the waiter with his other paw.

We rehearse the speech while Ogleby eats, which doesn't take very long. He eats pretty much the way he talks. We add some of Carroll's suggestions, and the engagement announcement, until it meets with her approval. They ask me what I think of it and I say it's fine. It all sounds okay, but it doesn't sound like me. That's all right; it doesn't have to. I just have to say the words.

Ogleby lets me pick up the check, and laughs when I say I'll take it out of his commission. Then he wants to ride over with us, but I tell him I don't want to drive back to the restaurant to pick up his car when the conference is over. I also want to talk to Carroll about Brian and I don't want Ogleby to hear.

"Maybe he won't even be there," I say. "Maybe Lee will have stopped him."

She shakes her head. "He'll be there."

"How do you know?"

Her face is set, steely-eyed. "Because if it were me, I'd be there."

She's dead right. When we get to the media room at the stadium, there's a small knot of reporters outside in the hallway. In the center, holding court, is Brian.

He raises a paw as we approach. "Well, if it isn't my big gay friend," he drawls.

Caroll murmurs, "Just keep walking," but I don't need her to tell me that. I stride past into the media room itself.

"When you're done hearing his denial, come back out here for the truth," Brian says loudly as the reporters fall in behind us.

A few of them try to get questions in. "Dev, how long have you known Brian?" "Dev, when did you realize you were gay?" I ignore them.

Vince appears at my elbow. He waves the reporters to their chairs and me up to the platform. The reporters quiet down when they see him. "Please hold your questions for just a few minutes," he says. "Hey, Frank."

The otter waves back, pausing on his way to his seat. "Hey, Vince. Anything new gonna happen?"

Vince looks at me and I shake my head. "Nah," he says. "You want to just write up the standard denial?"

"Oh, no, I just got a three o'clock tee time. Wanted to know when I was gonna get out of here."

"Where you playing?"

I miss the rest of the discussion about golf courses. Caroll and I step up to the podium, where Ogleby is already waiting. He stands behind me, bouncing from foot to foot while the reporters settle in. I see Coach walk in, too, but he stands to one side of the room, just leaning against a wall. When I catch his eye, he nods.

It's intimidating. At least here, all the people focused on me are polite, waiting for me to talk. I don't get the feeling of being in a tank full of sharks, like I did in Veterans Field. But still, the largest crowd of reporters I've ever been in front of alone was three student reporters after we made the playoffs my last year at Forester. It's even a larger crowd than yesterday, when I was sharing the spotlight with Gerrard and Coach.

Brian lounges in the doorway, watching me with a smirk. I wonder fleetingly what happened to Lee. Well, in a few minutes, Brian will be the center of attention again, I guess. After my denial, he can keep telling his story. I feel a little bit queasy.

Vince raises his paws. "Thanks for coming, everyone. This'll be quick. We really don't like to address rumors and hearsay, but after the nasty demonstrations at the game yesterday, Devlin felt he needed to set the record straight. He's going to read a prepared statement, we'll take a few questions, and we'll get you out of here pretty fast." The crowd murmurs.

Vince turns to me. "All yours," he says.

I look out at the sea of faces. I know what I'm supposed to say, but it's difficult to make the words come out. My nerve is failing me, here when it comes right down to it. Ogleby hisses behind me, "Regarding the allegations," and I wave him off. This whole room full of reporters hanging on my every word feels unreal, like I'm an impostor, and as soon as I open my mouth, they'll realize I'm not the one they're waiting for. I'm used to pressure on the field, but this is a whole different ballgame. Carroll sitting beside me, quietly supportive of the tableau (her word), just underscores the phoniness. Brian, just outside the room in the hallway, is surrounded by a small gaggle of reporters nominally watching me, with their ears perked toward him.

I scan the room again, taking in a breath to say, "Regarding," but it catches in my throat. All the way in the back of the room, there's a pretty, young vixen with blue eyes. She's wearing a new blouse, Chevali red and gold, which is why I didn't recognize him right away, not until our eyes met. My mouth dries up. Time stops.

I'm back at the first game he attended, looking up and feeling that compartment in my heart ease open, the knowledge that he was there only for me, and only I knew it. There's no reason for him to be in drag here at the press conference, except to remind me of those days when his support made all the difference in the world. I don't know if even now he realizes how much it meant.

It makes me think of him and his life, too, how wearing that disguise is something he does even when he doesn't have to, just because — for whatever reason — he enjoys it. He likes that I like it, but it's also who he is, and he doesn't shy away from it. I know that he might not have intended that to be a message to me today, it's just something he likes doing. Then I ask myself what the hell I'm thinking. Of course it was a message. He's a fox, isn't he?

He smiles. The hands of the clock move again. Ogleby hisses behind me. The reporters play with their pens, impatient. Lee's smile stays fixed, illuminating the room. He doesn't know what I'm going to say, for once, but it doesn't matter. Whatever I say, it'll be okay. We'll work through it.

"I came here," I say, "to address the recent allegations. Because they've been a real distraction to the team." Coach, to my left, nods. And then I picture myself reading the next line in Ogleby's script: *They are completely false*. I see paws raised for questions, my own bland answers

resisting the attempt to catch me out in the lie. Ogleby would take care of me. I'd be assured of my starting job (for a little while), I'd have Carroll's company, maybe a nice wedding and a honeymoon (she promised I could bring Lee if we go somewhere exotic). Life would be good. It'd be easy.

"They are completely false," I say. "I never had any contact with Brian Dallas last week, as he claims." Back in the hallway, Brian smirks. He says something to one of the nearby reporters.

Ogleby pats me on the shoulder. Carroll puts on a gleaming smile. I'm searching for the words to go on with what I really want to say when Frank, in the front, gives me the perfect opening. "What about the previous rumors about your sexuality?"

Ogleby's paw tightens on my shoulder. Carroll slides her paw over, inviting mine. I ignore it.

I don't want it to be easy. I love the challenge of football, and if it were easy, it wouldn't be fun. Lee, smiling in the back of the room, gives me the courage to follow through on what I came here to do: To commit, to give myself wholly to what I care about, on the field and off. I hear his voice in my head, from weeks ago: *you are Devlin Miski*.

But there's more than that. It's not just who I am. He did the same thing last night, made the same commitment to me. *We are Dev and Lee*, I amend to myself.

"Oh, those are true," I say. "Completely true."

Fifty paws shoot into the air. Voices shout questions as though I'd flipped a switch, making the noise in the room almost unbearable. Vince can't make himself heard. Ogleby makes a noise behind me. Coach moves in my peripheral vision. But the only person I'm looking at is the blue-eyed fox in the back of the room. Lee's smile falters. He drops his head into his paws. It takes me a moment to see that he's crying. My resolve wavers, but of course I can't back out now.

Paws crowd my vision. I turn to Ogleby, but he's no longer there. Carroll half-rises, looks at the reporters, and then fixes the smile on her muzzle and sits back down. Probably none of the reporters can see the tightness in it that I can. Coach is on his way out of the room, too. The reporters are starting to yell out their questions. "How long...?" "Who is...?" "What do your...?" Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Brian in the doorway to the hall, alone, abandoned.

I recognize Dwight, from Sporting News. He's one of the few familiar



faces in the room. I point at him. "Devlin," he says, "why did you choose to make this revelation now?"

"I didn't," I say. I look to the hallway where Brian's trying in vain to get the attention of some of the reporters near him. I wonder how he feels.

He got what he wanted: a player is out, and it's me, Lee's boyfriend. But I think he wanted to be more involved in the public outing. He wanted me to be dragged out, not for me to stand up and do it on my own. A minor difference, like lining up one foot to the left on the field. I've got that feeling now, that no matter how the play unfolds, I'm doing the best I can. I'm in the right position.

"But you chose to acknowledge them."

My phone buzzes. I glance down at the text message.

Lee 1:16 pm: *Love you.* Through black paws, at the back of the room, light catches the glint of one blue eye. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

The next question is, "Do your teammates know?"

"I don't want to talk about my team," I say.

"That's right." Everyone turns to see Fisher walk into the room, through the doorway where Brian had been. I didn't see him leave. "We can speak for ourselves." Behind him, Coach walks back in and steps to the side, letting six of my teammates through the door. They arrange themselves behind me: Gerrard, Charm, Carson, Ty, one of the backup linebackers, and, in something of a shock, Aston. Fisher comes up to me and pats my shoulder before going to stand back with the rest of the team. Aston gives everyone a big smile and a wave, pats my shoulder just like Fisher did, and then poses in front of the other guys. Fisher will tell me later that he found Aston hanging around and dragged him along to provide star presence. Given the Internet jokes about Aston, I have to say I'm surprised and more than a little impressed.

I turn away from the reporters, look at the guys, and I want to tell them how much this means to me, but they already know. Fisher gives me a quick thumbs-up; Coach, a quick nod. The other guys smile or just fold their arms and look resolute and menacing, like bodyguards. When I turn back to the reporters, I straighten, looking at Vince with confidence. Like Lee always told me, the best way to fight fear and ignorance is with honesty and openness. I think about Charm and Fisher, I think about Brick's grudging acceptance, and the rest of the guys behind me, and

finally, perhaps, I really understand what he means.

Vince has gotten the mob somewhat under control. He points to a black squirrel in the back, who stands up and asks, "When did you first realize you were gay?"

Behind the squirrel, Lee's sitting up straight, smiling wide as I've ever seen him. I hold his eyes with mine.

"Funny thing," I say. "It started with a girl."

About the Author.

Kyell Gold took up furry erotica writing after high school, making the team at his small liberal arts college as a walk-on. He was drafted late by Sofawolf and blossomed in the professional league, earning four Ursa Major awards in his first three years as a pro for his novels *Volle* and *Pendant of Fortune*, and for his stories "Jacks to Open" and "Don't Blink." He was also nominated in three Ursa Major categories and for a Gaylactic Spectrum Award for his collection *The Prisoner's Release and Other Stories* and the stories in it.

His various online presences are linked from www.kyellgold.com. In the off-season, he lives in California with his partner.

About the Artist

Blotch was one of the top-rated high school furry artist prospects of 2006 and starred in college before being made the #1 pick of Sofawolf. He's excelled in his first two years, garnering several convention GOH appearances and a 2007 Ursa Major award for his FAU Souvenir Book cover. In 2008, his full-color graphic novel *Dog's Days of Summer* was released to wide acclaim.

His gallery can be found at www.screwbald.com. For more information on *Dog's Days of Summer*, see the official website at www.dogsdaysofsummer.com.

About Sofawolf Press

Sofawolf Press was founded in 1999 to provide a venue to showcase great writers of anthropomorphic fiction and to promote the genre to a wider audience.

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